YOIMONOGATARI

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Chapter Two – Mayoi Snail

Translated by »sawa«

EPUB edition

Mayoi Snail

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Chapter Two

Mayoi Snail

Note on chapter title

Bakemonogatari's second chapter is also commonly known as 'Mayoi Snail'; that chapter uses the Japanese *maimai*, whereas this chapter uses the loanword *suneiru*. It is current practice to retroactively refer to the *Bakemonogatari* arc as 'Mayoi Maimai' to avoid confusion.

Note on translation

All names are given family name first. Honorifics are…complicated. Some are kept, some are not.

001

If one wishes to pay Hachikuji Mayoi a visit, one must ready themselves for the hardiest of ascents. This isn't so much about the mountain's altitude, but about that trail that twists and turns like a snake on fire, one which dents the determination of any who climbs it.

Like the trail of a snake – no.

Like the spiral of a snail's shell.

And if one does trek this meandering, dangerous path, with no signboards to navigate with and no spot to take a break on, it is inevitable that one should see a brand new *torii* gate, so new that it's a complete mismatch with its surroundings, that being the gate towards the Kitashirahebi Shrine; her abode.

Still, if one were to imagine Hachikuji Mayoi bouncing out the shrine eagerly welcoming you, that'd be wishful thinking.

She is, after all, a little year five primary school girl who enjoys the great outdoors, so the shrine is unattended for a lot of the time… guess one has to be patient if she's not there. It goes without saying that heading back down the mountain and searching for her around town would be an alternative option, though there is a great likelihood that one would go home exhausted and empty-handed.

In any case, even if one gets to meet her, it would be impudent to directly see eye-to-eye with this ten-year-old young girl – because Hachikuji Mayoi is, and I say this with fearful respect, the god this shrine worships.

An oddity born from a lost cow.

A ghost of a little girl.

A god, newly crowned.

Which is to say if one wished to meet her, the clever way to go

about it would be to stay and pray believing that she's already there – but if one were stupid, as stupid as I am, and wished to see her no matter what, then there is an easy, completely simple way of going about it.

Pick a road, any road.

Any road you can think of, and be lost.

She is, after all, a god of lost children.

002

‘What I say stays in this room.’

Throughout human history, anything prefaced with ‘what I say stays in this room’ never really manages to stay in that room – let alone these days, in a world where as soon as someone picks up even your own mutterings, they become the talk of the town. Putting aside where that phrase even came from (‘talk of the town’? Since when could towns talk?), as soon as I ask that question, the meaning of that phrase would become the talk of the town, or even the world over.

I bet by the time you hear something like ‘this stays between us’, you’d already be the hundredth person hearing it – for me, especially, I imagine myself to be the last possible person to hear of it; the seven-billion-five-hundred-millionth man, I am.

What I say stays between you and me.

And so, when that year twelve high school girl from my *alma mater*, Naoetsu High School, the flowery Higasa Hoshiame said those words to me,[1] those were the thoughts that ran through my head. Deary me, looks like a rumour’s reached its final possible recipient.

Rumours – or perhaps a spook.

An urban legend.

Word on the street.

Chinese whispers.

Or who knows, it could be actual hot gossip – whatever it was, she has been talking about the glorious Naoetsu High School Girls’ Basketball Club she’s part of up until now, and she was on the verge of running out of topics to talk about, so I agreed to take some time for a break.

And some breaking news it was that sprang from this break time.

Incidentally, if you ask me which room ‘in this room’ is referring to, that’d be my own room in my house, the room of Araragi Koyomi, a Manase University fresher in Mathematics.

And she really seems to be Kanbaru Suruga’s best friend, as she said,

‘So this is the bewitching bed of the esteemed Araragi-senpai! I’m truly humbled!’

Upon which Higasa-chan ignored the cushion I’d prepared, and dove straight onto my allegedly bewitching mattress. I thought she’d break the springs, but then I wondered if she’s part of the swimming club and not the basketball club, such was the beauty in her form.

‘This must be the bed you’ve conquered innumerable girls with in high school! Your reputation precedes you; I’ve heard all the stories!’

Who knows how many things about me that ‘weren’t supposed to leave the room’ she’s heard from that superstar friend of hers…I wish she’d stop frolicking on my bed with some excuse like ‘I don’t want my uniform all wrinkled’.

Right this instant.

‘Oh no, excuse me. My impulses have gotten the better of me. See, I’m the type who sleeps better when on someone else’s bed.’

‘A messed up gal, you are. What do you even mean “type”, you’re the only one who’d fit in this category! Get outta my sight right now – no, don’t, get to the hospital right now; I’ll take you there if I have to.’

‘You’ll take me there yourself? How gentle of you~ So this is how you brought all those girls on their knees back in high school – girls *and* high school girls!’

‘Can you not make me sound like some philanderer? Back when I was a high school boy, I didn’t bring any high school girl on their knees – if anything, I’m the one who got constantly brought on his

knees by them…'

'Sure you did!'

She said as she continued her ruckus, although I didn't tell her the whole truth – it was less about love, more like bringing me down to hell.

And then there's one high school girl who slipped on the stairs and came down from the heavens…not that I invited Higasa-chan here to memorialise my memoirs though.

No, I didn't invite her. She invited herself.

She came at her own time and leisure.

…If anything, I don't remember any girl I've met who's invaded my personal space this quickly.

A swift attacker, she is.

Even back in high school, the girl who I'm fortunate to still be together with as lovers, Senjougahara Hitagi, even she wouldn't step into the Araragi household this easily…didn't it take her half a year just to step into this very room?

Call this a generation gap…no, not that I'm the sort of old timer who'd have any expectations on girls and chastity.

Besides, Higasa-chan's in the same year and class as Kanbaru, so she's only a year younger than me…whatever the difference was, it definitely wasn't six hundred years.

Do, however, allow me to defend my junior's honour: Higasa-chan didn't come to her senpai's place for no reason at all – even if she *did* jump on my bed for zero discernible reason (though if a high school girl did have reason to jump onto the bed of an ex-high school boy, that is, me, then that'd be bad); the reason Higasa-chan came to my place was, as I said before, because of that case that happened to my *alma mater*'s Girls' Basketball Club; she's having trouble letting go.

A giant mess, that was.

And even though we're from the same school, back when I was still there, a girl as bright and energetic and had no darkness in her heart as Higasa-chan was not the kind of person I'd have associated with in any capacity, so the first time we met was only just recently – in other words, as I've said earlier, this girl who's exchanged numbers with me only a few days ago was now messing about on my bed.

'Higasa-chan, I may as well say this from the get-go: the most this bed has seen was a middle school girl who cupped her breasts wearing nothing but gym shorts, alright?'

'Isn't that just plendifermaxigargantuapocalypticalifragilisticexpialidociously bad?'

So warped was the word I never would've gotten 'plenty' from it. The shock from that revelation was such that the normally sunshiny Higasa-chan became gloomy all of a sudden. Mm, I thought to myself, that's not quite right.

The 'mummy incident' from the death-prepared, death-inevitable, death-certain vampire, Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster may look like it's over thanks to the stealthy assistance from the specialist, Gaen Izuko (and it really was a stealthy job), but there were still traces left behind, and neither was its root cause neatly exorcised.

Once balanced between the leadership and charisma of two colossi, Kanbaru Suruga and Higasa Hoshiame, the Naoetsu High School Girls' Basketball Club was now dented, derelict, deteriorating, disintegrating, busy tearing itself apart. Such real problems were probably harder to face than some vampire of legend.

But now that we're here, we can't leave it be – I'm not some feline character who'd respond pithily with 'I don't know everything, I just know what I know', but as someone who got involved with that drama, I resolved to see this problem through.

Doing all I can, as a human.

Doing all I can, as an ex-vampire.

…Well, given that during the process of Gaen-san asking me to help with the 'mummy incident' I had Higasa-chan hand me a forbidden list of pretty high school girls and their pretty personal information, I do owe her something potentially life-disrupting for me.

It wasn't my intent to access every member's private information within the Girls' Basketball Club…either way, Higasa-chan came to the Araragi household today to meet me so we could work out the details.

Alone.

Kanbaru was going to join us too, but she cancelled at the last minute – I personally hope she's studying for the entrance exams, but I guess she's still a busy character all the time.

As long as she's not playing with Ougi-chan…but no, honestly, I can't say for sure.

Surely I'm not the kind of person who's fooling around with his juniors back from high school because he can't fit into university life? – but this isn't fooling around, this is something so serious that lives are at stake.

Then again, there is some truth in saying I haven't adjusted to going from the most senior cohort to the least…compared to Kanbaru's social life or the future of the Girls' Basketball club, perhaps re-evaluating my own life would prove more personally pertinent.

Anyway, in order to tell myself that 'Araragi Koyomi is having a great time at university', I recently sent an electronic mail towards a new friend I made at uni, Hamukai Meniko.

If lady luck's on my side, she'd probably notice it some time this month…anyway, where were we?

'So, Higasa-chan, what's not supposed to "leave this room"?'

'Uh…is it really okay if I said it here…? I don't know if this room's secure or not. This room isn't bugged, is it?'

‘Who am I, some spy being watched by the government?’

That I did not say, for I couldn’t be so sure.

Even if this room isn’t bugged, there’s still a blonde, gold-eyed young girl inside my shadow, and there’s also a corpse dressed as a plush next door – the two always watching over my every tiny move.

Every move I make, every step I take.

But I guess it’s fine.

Chances are right now (midday during a rest day), that blonde gold-eyed young girl is in the middle of her beauty sleep, and that corpse doll should also be on the move, and besides, everybody probably knows it already, so I probably don’t need to be highly discreet about it.

Once I hear what the latest fad among high school girls is, I feel obligated to spread the word. So, what sweets and desserts are in vogue right now?

‘What I say stays in this room – so I’ve got a friend whose younger sister’s in year five; she got kidnapped.’

003

Isn't this too secret a secret!?

Isn't this something not even the journalists are allowed to report on!?

Isn't this too much for this room!?

Even as I fired off my three-pronged retort, Higasa-chan gave no hint of regret – not even with a triple retort? Should I grab my retort shotgun and let her bathe in retort bullets?

No, actually, if I had a hunting license, I wouldn't hesitate in showering everything around me in bullets – it's a kidnapping.

Of a year five primary school girl.

She did mean someone snatched a year five schoolgirl, right?

Please tell me you only meant to say someone snatched a fiver.

If this was a mugging (a mere fiver, too), then I can at least think of things I can do.

To bring such a case into my personal space…I would've preferred something less intense.

'Oh, she's not actually my friend. She's a friend of a friend', Higasa-chan corrected.

That's not making it any better.

A friend of a friend…you hear this a lot in urban legends.

'However, for something like this, saying "a friend" lends urgency, doesn't it? Besides, if someone's a friend of a friend of mine, then they're basically my friend.'

She revealed a sentimentality I'm envious of.

Wouldn't it be great though, if instead of 'a friend of a friend', it'd been 'an imaginary friend'?

If someone still devoted time to their imaginary friend in their third year of high school, I can still marginally accept it – much better than a year five schoolgirl getting kidnapped.

'When I mention Araragi-senpai to people, I'd never say you were the senpai of a friend, I'd just say you're my friend. That's all there is to it.'

'Can we please stop at "senpai of your friend"?…I feel it's for the best if we had a bit more time to figure out what to call this relationship…'

Never mind a semi-regular, couldn't we have found a way to make her only a guest star limited to the last episode?

There must be a way.

''Fraid it's too late. My hair's all over Araragi-senpai's bed now. Surely this is irrefutable proof of our friendship?'

'Isn't that proof of something *beyond* friendship? You may find doing this amusing, Higasa-chan, but I would advise not letting yourself be readily mistaken.'

'Oh my. Araragi-senpai giving advice on morality, how unlike your reputation.'

'Don't talk reputation, when I was in high school, I didn't even have a nickname…'

'That said, I will heed your advice. It's an old weak spot of mine. I've always had a thing for clever boys. If some guy comes first in a test, I would stop at nothing to approach him. Though for some reason, it's been the cause of some misunderstanding, and all those boys who got first never seemed to keep that spot for long.'

A devilish charm.

Thank goodness *I* never made it to the top…

‘And since they outlive their usefulness once they’re not at the top, I go after his successor.’

You’re the one who’s philandering now, aren’t you?

Stop making all the men around you fall; be it falling for you, or falling in their grades.

They don’t climb their way back up so easily.

‘Higasa-chan, I think it’s best if you left my house right now.’

‘O the humanity! Araragi-senpai, abandoning a year five schoolgirl!’

If this was the Naoetsu High School Girls’ Basketball Club at stake, then maybe my answer would’ve been different, but threatening me with a year five schoolgirl that came out of nowhere doesn’t achieve the same effect…

Anyway, I’ll let Higasa-chan reflect on the extent of her sins when she’s on her deathbed…now that I know of this, I can no longer pretend that I don’t.

A kidnapping.

If it’s staying in this room, then I don’t mind hearing more about it – is it happening as we speak?

Right now, right here?

‘Right now indeed. The hottest news item there is; well, I say hot, it’s still a secret. If the police know, then that girl might lose her life.’

‘And Kanbaru never told you who my parents are?’

‘Ah yes, speaking of hot, I do find myself particularly suited to hot pants. I have the fullest confidence in my legs, though not in the same way Ruga does. So when the time comes for my copyrighted image, I don’t want a version of me in uniform, I want to see me in hot pants. That is my one heartfelt wish.’

‘Copyrighted image…’

So this kid’s trying to get herself onto the anime scene too – trying to get yourself on the cover of *Newtype*, are we?

And for her to be this off-topic right now – whatever happened to secret hot news?

‘Apologies, that went somewhere completely different. Ah, right, speaking of going off-topic, I’m a natural at lower body reflexes. I might not be as flexible as Ruga overall, but I dare say I can arch backwards better than her. Observe my superb pose!’

‘Can you not do a reverse arch stretch on my bed?’

‘Why’s it called a “shrimping stretch” in Japanese anyway?[2] Surely this looks like it’s arching in the exact opposite way as shrimp do. Oh, and this all happened in the next town over.’

‘The shrimping?’

‘The kidnapping.’

Oh right, the kidnapping.

I thought she was about to introduce me to some local delicacy – I was getting ready to cook some *kakiage* tempura.

The next town over…that’s not nearby at all.

We aren’t in some giant metropolis, so a single ‘town’ covers quite a lot of land…of course, the same applies to ‘the next town over’.

I don’t have a good feeling about this.

Well, it’s not really ‘a feeling’, it just ticks all the boxes…I’ve recently had many chances in solving cyphers with Meniko in uni (see? I don’t just hang out with my juniors), so I’m used to picking out something from nothing.

A year five primary schooler.

The next town over.

A kidnapping – that is to say, she's missing.

'You sure she's not just – lost? Y'know, the sort of thing where the parents love their kid so much they kick up a fuss saying their child got kidnapped as soon as a few hours tick past their curfew?'

'Wouldn't a few hours still be sufficiently worrying? In the state of Hawaii, it's illegal to leave a child under the age of twelve alone for more than a few hours.'

Who told you to bring up Hawaii?

The next town over isn't *that* far away.

'This stays in this room' is going global – but well, when it comes to having a law compelling parents to keep watch over their children, speaking as someone who now has the vote, I do support it in principle.

'Just like me, I always keep an eye on young girls.'

'Isn't that something quite different…? If anything, it's more of a crime if you don't keep your eyes away from them', Higasa-chan said, bemused.

'It's hard to tell. I don't think it's a lost child', she continued.

But for me, I really did mean something completely different…for the blonde, gold-eyed young girl sleeping in my shadow, as soon as I take my eyes off her, I'd have no idea what she's up to.

Although I guess the same goes for any young girl.

Every young girl – every year five girl.

'By the way, I found three mistakes in Araragi-senpai's speech just now.'

'Why are you trying to sound like a famed detective…'

Are you trying to take over the whole series?

Becoming a main character in those hot pants?

‘First, it hasn’t been hours since she disappeared, it’s been days.’

‘Well, if that’s the kind of mistake I made, then there’s no need to elaborate on the oth –’

‘The second mistake –’

My admission of defeat went unnoticed as Higasa-chan carried on… looks like she’s the kind of person who likes pointing out people’s mistakes.

She’d make a good detective.

‘That kid’s family doesn’t have their own curfew.’

‘Hmm. Isn’t that quite progressive? To treat a child as an individual, not as some body double to be micromanaged. Shows they care about autonomy.’

‘The third mistake, by extension, is that there aren’t any overprotective parents at all – and the fourth is, they didn’t kick up a fuss.’

Since when did you add in a fourth mistake? – this seems to mirror my own life somewhat (it is expected for my number of mistakes to stack up with a geometric progression); however, the fourth I cannot ignore.

They did not kick up a stink?

‘So – *what’re they up to*? The parents, I mean.’

‘Nothing in particular…well, they’re probably equally confused and have no idea what to do.’

‘…What?’

Ah, I see – so they received a ransom call from the kidnapper (or do

they just text a ransom note these days?) that said if they called the police their daughter would come back in a body bag, or said they had to keep it a secret from everybody, and just live life as they do?

It's not that they aren't doing anything, it's that they can't do anything.

Is that's what's going on here?

'No, I don't think anybody's approached them this specifically, but even so, without any contact, they don't think telling the police is a good thing. Uhh, where to start…'

Higasa-chan said, her face frustrated (all the while still arching, so you could say she's frustrated while holding a frustrating pose).

'Wait, am I allowed to say this?'

She tilted her head.

Of course not, right?

'Ah shit~ I was getting all up and close with Araragi-senpai that I blurted everything out. You're really good at letting people's guards down~ As expected from the son of a family of detectives! You really are the Great Huntsman Koyomi!'

'I have never gone by that name.'

Besides, my parents may be police officers, but they aren't detectives…not that there's any use in squabbling over that mistake.

This slow, oblivious Hysterics-chan, no, Higasa-chan only realised she said too much just now. I thought she'd know when to shut up.

'Well, I guess there's no going back. If one is having poison, might as well lick the plate clean – if one is spitting venom, might as well spit the plate out, too.'

It seems she's going to let everything that's supposed to 'stay in this room' out – I just hope she doesn't actually spit any venom.

That'd be the job of my childhood acquaintance.

I don't want to imagine a world with two of them.

If Higasa-chan stopped telling me about the thing that's supposed to 'stay in this room', then I would've had to use my last resort (that is, to make her fall for me using my seduction technique – which is to say, tears falling down my face) to get to the bottom of it…this is, after all, shaping up to be a highly delicate case…however, since she's willing to keep going, I'm not going to stop her just yet.

You could blame it on curiosity, or simply plain ol' FOMO – whichever it was, I'm in.

I'm involved in this case now.

'Relatedly, Araragi-senpai, could you keep this a secret as well? If you don't tell anyone, I'll send you some sexy photos of mine as a reward.'

'Have you not had any lessons in digital literacy?'

'Where were we again?'

'We're talking about how you're retarded, we've just been through this.'

She could probably outstupid Kanbaru.

If there's something I've learnt at uni, the world really is full of all kinds of people; I just hadn't had the displeasure of knowing about them before.

'Ah yes, I finally remember now, clever me. I've just said "where to start", which in the script would be on page 175.'

'So this is all lines from a script?'

I thought she was troubling herself over what to say, but turns out she's reading all this from a script…the 175th page, no less.

We're pretty far in, aren't we?

‘Also, I still have no idea on even the basics of the case. I don’t even know the name of the year five primary schoolgirl who got abducted.’

‘It’s Beniguchi Kujaku-chan [紅口孔雀, lit. “Peafowl Redmouth”].’[3]

I guess anonymity never crossed her mind.

She just blurted out her full name.

I thought she wouldn’t have out of privacy…or could it be an alias? Though ‘Beniguchi Kujaku’ isn’t the kind of name you’d make up in the spur of the moment…of course, I’ve never heard that name before.

She might be ‘the younger sister of a friend of a friend’, though for all I know she could be the sister of one of the members in the Girls’ Basketball Club; but if memory serves me right, there weren’t any ‘Beniguchi’s in that list she gave me earlier.

‘When it comes to odd family names, I don’t think Araragi-senpai’s one to comment. What do you think about shortening it to “Benikujaku” [紅孔雀, lit. ‘red peafowl’] though? Seems easier that way.’

‘It’s so easy I don’t think I’ll ever remember her full name…’

‘That said, you really are impressive, Araragi-senpai. Quite the instincts you have. It is true that there are no “Beniguchi”s in the Girls’ Basketball Club, but on the first part of “a friend of a friend” – this “friend” was a basketball player herself. She’s part of the original basketball team. Like me and Ruga, she’s in her third year of high school.

‘She’s part of the OG Club I’ve introduced to you earlier, remember that?’ – Higasa-chan said.

004

Back then, I remember entering Higasa-chan's home, whom I've only just met through Kanbaru (at night, too, and I've even joined in on her pyjama party), so even in the face of her entering the room of a uni student, I don't feel qualified to tell her off – even if that then was an emergency.

Anyway, when it comes to the OG Club in the Naoetsu High School girls' basketball team, I've got a deep impression of that…so deep, I really want to wipe it off. Given that those were the golden years with a superstar like Kanbaru, of course they'd be strong characters in their own right.

They were, after all, the girls who brought a crippling private school team into the nationals…the reward for that was the current team inheriting an unhealthy debt; such is the cruel hand of fate.

You could say, it's destiny.

Or you could say what comes around goes around.

And so, just as I never managed to cut off high school at uni, Kanbaru, Higasa-chan, and everybody in the OG Club probably couldn't let go, and so off they went, getting involved in their own way post-retirement.

'Does the name Mitonon ring a bell? Mitonon's got a friend from middle school who's a Beniguchi, and *her* younger sister's called Beniguchi Kujaku…although to be more specific, that friend of Mitonon's is actually her senpai.'

Seems like that relationship's drifted even further apart…

So to make things clear: Beniguchi Kujaku-chan isn't a 'younger sister of a friend of a friend', she's a 'younger sister of a senpai of a friend' – I was originally thinking how news of a young girl being kidnapped could've entered my ears, but when the range becomes this large, then it does make some amount of sense.

‘Five circles’.[4]

The theory that all people are five social connections away from each other, including heads of state – and Beniguchi Kujaku’s relation to me would be ‘the younger sister of the senpai of the teammate of the dear friend of a junior’.

Which makes it five people exactly.

When I put it like that, it’s not that surprising that I know a kidnapping victim.

It’s certainly not as surprising as vampires.

…One further circle away from the fifth, and we have the kidnapper.

Hmmm. Interesting.

‘Uh…Mitonon, who was she?’

‘Oh, you’ve forgotten about Mitonon? Even after seeing her in such a sorry state?’

‘By “sorry state”, you mean in pyjamas, right? Stop trying to confuse people. You know there could be people who started with this book, right?’

‘There are?’

‘For those of you who’ve just started on this page, this must be mighty confusing, huh?’

‘Even if you take a leaf from variety shows, that wouldn’t make a difference…even if you said something like “for those of you who’ve just tuned in, this must be mighty confusing, huh”, it still wouldn’t make a difference. Mitonon is Mitonon. Well, calling Mitonon “Mitonon” is like calling Ruga “Ruga”, it’s what I personally call them.’

Then isn’t that just speaking in riddles?

Please don't give *me* a nickname – I've already got enough weird ones.

Like 'Koyomin', or 'Koyokoyo'.

'Ragi', even.

'Well, I shall give you the answer you seek. Miton's full name is –'

'Hey, you're the one who nicknamed her. Since when did she turn into a type of glove?'

'Miton's full name is Shounou Mitono.'

She's sticking with it.

Then again, 'Miton' is a more nickname-ish nickname – aha, Shounou Mitono.

I see. The kid who wore the *jinbei*.

'You really only remember them through their pyjama choice…I see those exposed armpits from that loosely-sewn garment proved quite impressionable.'

'My memory is not that photographic.'

I say that, I don't want to remember the wrong person (it is well-known amongst people who know me that I have a terrible memory…even I can't deny it), so I gave it some effort.

Self-introductions at the start of that pyjama party…come to think of it, wasn't *I* the one who dressed the worst?

Right, right, that's it.

Wearing a jinbei*, I'm Shounou Mitono! Born 9 April, aged eighteen! I'm 170 centimetres tall, my position's a point guard, and my favourite play is double teaming!*

That's what it sounded like…she's a lot taller than me. Well, all basketball players tend to be like that.

By the way, Higasa-chan's height is 165 centimetres.

Which feels about the same as mine – and her choice of pyjamas consisted of a long-sleeved tee.

'Quite the memory you have, if you could even remember what I wore. And you pretended not to care when I showed off my beautiful legs. Then again, I wasn't wearing any hot pants when I wore that long-sleeved tee!'

'Can we go back to talking about Mitonon? I don't want to talk about your legs.'

It wasn't about Mitonon anyway.

It's Mitonon's senpai's younger sister.

'We've been saying "younger sister", but she's probably her stepsister…I'm not sure about them myself, since I'd only heard about it from the grapevine; you know, something that once "stayed in a room".'

Sounds about right.

The whole five circles thing doesn't exclude complexities – and at the same time, it has an element to it not unlike a game of telephone.

A stepsister, right…

I too have younger sisters (one big, one small – speaking of the big one, she's in her first year of high school and is as tall as a basketball player; the corpse doll I mentioned earlier, she belongs to the smaller sister), but not all sibling relationships are the same; if she's a stepsister, then that'd feel even more different.

I can't imagine it, frankly.

'If those two sisters of mine were stepsisters – that has crossed my mind before, actually. See, if they're not my blood siblings, then I could marry them.'

‘No you can’t. That has to be illegal in Japan.’

So I’d be sanctioned by the law?

Me?

‘I think you’ll find you’re wrong. I’ve double-checked it. Article 734 of the Civil Code.’

‘You really went and checked? I’m speechless.’

‘It only outlaws marrying one’s stepmother.’

‘My speechlessness knows no bounds.’

Higasa-chan returned back on topic.

‘Benikujaku-chan herself was born from when her father remarried. Whole family seems to be made up of remarried people. Mitonon’s senpai, well, they may be no couple, but when it comes to Benikujaku-chan, they’re pretty close.’

‘Wait a second. Since this started with the Girls’ Basketball Club, I’ve always assumed so, but Mitonon’s –’

Feels weird for me to call Mitonon by her nickname…I’ve never had someone I can call them by their nickname with.

‘Mitono-chan’s –’

Nope, now I’m sounding like I’m trying to be close with her.

Not in a good way, either.

‘*Shounou*-chan’s senpai from middle school, I’ve always thought it was a she, but I might of course be wrong. So this senpai, that is, the older stepsister of Benikujaku-chan, are they a boy or a girl?’

Furthermore, I don’t know enough about their age to tell if I should’ve said ‘a boy or a girl’. If they were a senpai back from middle school, they could be an adult.

This is what gets left out when you’re in the middle of the five

circles, but she's a pretty important figure amongst all this…it is their sister who got kidnapped, after all.

'It's a she. I can't be certain, but she's about the same age as Araragi-senpai. Maybe she's a year older; she's nineteen and in uni – something like that? Sorry, I don't know. She could be already out working, or away on an overseas trip. Or she could be dead.'

'If she's dead, I'm pretty sure the parents would kick up a fuss.'

If the older sister's dead and the younger sister's kidnapped – no.

It could be why they didn't kick up a fuss.

In fact, I have a friend who went on a big overseas trip after graduating from high school, so I can't just take Higasa-chan's words in jest.

Hanekawa Tsubasa. She's got a complex family situation too; it's all messy and complicated. The point being, it was the kind of family where even if Hanekawa was little and she went missing, the parents wouldn't do anything so much as 'kick up a fuss'.

Family?

The parents weren't really parents, and that home wasn't homely at all.

I don't think the Beniguchis are like that, nor do I want to think that – though I guess if one expects some hidden drama with a family of remarriages and step-siblings, then one may have watched too many TV dramas.

Most families just quietly weather the storm – just like us, the Araragis, or the Senjougaharas.

As for the Hachikujis – I've no idea.

'……'

I don't think the family of that 'lost child' was a remarriage, but a divorce…and the father's side won custody…hmm.

Some would also say that ‘quietly weathering the storm’ is a problem in and of itself, and if we go deeper, it is fair to say that ‘somebody else in the same situation could’ve fared better’, or that ‘some people have worse to deal with’. It’s so true that you could even call it just, a justice as cruel as a kidnapping, as I’ve learnt.

As I’ve learnt – as I’m learning.

That ‘mummy incident’ triggered by Deathtopia Virtuoso Suicidemaster – if I had to say it, this vampire’s revisitation is just like having that hellish spring break revisited, but the conclusion to that was completely different to that spring break.

Even if it was also hellish.

It’s just a different hell.

‘I’m not in the same environment as them, and I hadn’t been in a bad position’ – even if that person throws these around as excuses to do their best, they shouldn’t be used against them.

Whatever happens to the Beniguchis is the business of the Beniguchis.

An abnormal case, something that ‘stays in this room’.

Something that should not be leaked by a third party – I may think that, but I didn’t stop Higasa-chan from revealing all this; it seems I’m lacking in training.

‘Well, not that I think she’s dead or anything. People don’t usually die that easy.’

‘Quite. It’s almost like they’re all immortal.’

‘However, be it going to uni or getting a job, or going on an overseas trip, that senpai’s most likely no longer at home – if Mitonon’s right. Her senpai’s always said something like “I’m relying on my parents up until I’m eighteen”.’

‘Impressive.’

It's something I'm almost obligated to say as someone who still lives in the same house – no, I do have plans to start living independently, but I never found a right place, so that's that for the time being.

'Wouldn't that be great though? Once Araragi lives on his own, it'd be an all-you-can-invite high school girl bash.'

'Can you at least say "female uni classmates"? Not that I'm not already going to their lodgings every day already…'

'What kind of timetable is that?'

All I'm doing is going to the flat of my childhood playmate and helping her clean up…incidentally, my girlfriend, Senjougahara Hitagi, lives in the girls' dormitories.

But that's for later. If I manage to remember.

'Cleaning up Ruga's room one moment, cleaning up a childhood playmate's the next. I feel like you can build a business with that; you did say you wanted to go independent.'

'I'm not going about it like that.'

'Ever thought about taking over your parents' business?'

'No shop under my parents' name. Much as I'm glad that they've planned for my future, I still have my own dreams I want to pursue. Much as I'm grateful for them raising me, I'm sorry to say, I'm walking my own path, one different from what my parents had in mind. I am my own person.'

'Sounds great, dear; however.'

Her senpai's words went in one ear and out the other.

'Going back to Mitonon's senpai, this doesn't seem to be the optimistic type of going independent – "I'm relying on my parents up until I'm eighteen" only seems to be her trying to perk herself up.'

‘Perk herself up?’

‘In other words, it’s more like “I’m holding out until I’m eighteen innit”; err…’

‘……’

The ‘innit’ was probably not what she said.

So that’s it…I’m starting to see what this is now.

‘In summary, Beniguchi-senpai isn’t on good terms with her parents. As I’ve said earlier, she’s kept suitably distant to her sister…but you know how it is with family. If you don’t get along, you don’t get along.’

I see.

This is the sort of problem that goes beyond remarriages and sisters-not-related-by-blood – back when I was in high school, all I thought about was leaving home for good.

It wasn’t just bad, it was the worst.

Catastrophic, even.

Back in the time when I was busy letting my parents down, I did consider the possibility of graduating (assuming I could) and moving out right after.

Yet now, I’m at uni, and I’m still living in the same house; life really is unpredictable…well, I guess this is a blessing in some way.

A blessing that involves me dying multiple times.

‘But I guess in the end, what goes around comes around, doesn’t it? This senpai we’re talking about bumbled through middle school and high school mumbling that, and she ended up living away from family, just as she wanted.’

‘For her personally, that’s probably a wish come true. For now, at least. But from what I heard from Mitonon, she’s not that happy

about it –'

'Well, if you leave your parents with all smiles on your face, that might be too cold-hearted.'

'That's not what I meant', Higasa-chan said.

'That senpai's heart's getting torn over leaving her little sister to those parents. Even so, her little sister's only in year five, so if she took her little sister under her wing, she'd be completely bogged down.'

I guess so.

In that sense, that makes it totally a kidnapping – I presume the lack of blood relations makes the whole thing even more complicated.

An uncaring world, this is.

No, it's meaningless to detach oneself from this, saying something like 'an uncaring world'. I have my biases too.

'So from what I can tell, Beniguchi-senpai – though she might be the same age as me – she doesn't seem to be on good terms with her parents, but what about Benikujaku-chan? If her older sister's worried about her being home, then does that mean she's not on good terms with her parents too?'

'She's in year five, so she's only ten. Even if someone's unhappy, it'd be pretty one-sided – she hasn't entered her rebellious phase; she hasn't even hit puberty. I don't think she could do much against her parents.'

The same probably couldn't be said of the parents (I heard primary schoolers are actually far more difficult to deal with than a rebellious middle schooler), though purely from strength, physique, or vocabulary, it all checks out.

'Don't think there's anything such as domestic abuse either, but if it's that obvious, even within families, it's really easy to intervene. If I had to say it, the Beniguchis just seem to go all hands off.'

‘Hands off…’

‘You could also call it a “rule off law” – not to be confused with the “rule of law”, though if a nation adheres to the rule of law, then you could say they follow a rule off law when it comes to its citizenry.’

What sounded like a cynical comment turned out to only be an elaborate pun.

Basketball aside, Higasa-chan doesn’t seem to play around with language well.

Didn’t she say they didn’t have curfews?

‘So neglect…surely Benikujaku didn’t sleep on the corridor?’

‘What kind of horror episode is that? I wouldn’t know, but if that’s the case, I’m sure Beniguchi-senpai would’ve never left her behind…I just don’t know the specifics.’

It probably can’t be helped; all she had was a vague understanding of ‘that other family’, passed down from the end of the chain in a game of gossip.

‘Anyway, it’s all the same.’

Higasa-chan said, trying to summarise.

‘Just like that, after that senpai went on her own, she still worries about Benikujaku-chan, her sister, all alone at home – and while that’s going on, all this happened.’

It all links back to where we started.

The thing that is not to leave this room.

‘One day, Benikujaku-chan never returned from school – even after school is done, even after the sun set, even as night settled in or come next dawn.’

‘……’

‘And of course, she didn’t go to school the next day either – in fact, the first person who figured something was amiss was her class teacher; the first witness, as it were.’

Hm? Hold on, I’m a little confused now.

Call me overcautious, but I too want to sort out what we’re dealing with – too many times during high school I ignored minor contradictions even when they made me uneasy, and only when they became irreversible did I regret not facing them earlier.

I’ve had enough of those regrets.

Not any more.

‘So what you’re saying is, the Beniguchis had zero idea what was happening until her class teacher called them.’

‘Indeed. It’s just a year five girl who didn’t come home through the night, so it wasn’t a big deal for them.’

No curfew – and yet.

Wouldn’t it still be cause for alarm if she only came back at dawn… no, I’ve been that runaway kid myself, so I’m not really qualified to judge.

A few moments ago, when I had my three or four mistakes pointed out, it did hurt; but it was right and necessary to fix those blemishes – those scars.

‘Think it’d be more accurate to say the parents didn’t take notice of it at all; they didn’t realise their kid had gone away until the teacher called.’

Ever since then.

Up until today, Benikujaku-chan never came back home.

Higasa-chan concluded.

And it never blew up – it’s all low-key.

‘May I ask one question?’

‘Go right ahead. One or a hundred, it’s all good. It is my duty to leak personal information to Araragi-senpai.’

‘Since when did I hire an informant? From what I’m hearing, it’s possible that instead of being kidnapped or even lost, Benikujaku-chan just left home, no? Her older sister may have waited ’til she was eighteen, but I guess Benikujaku-chan couldn’t afford to wait that long –’

Perhaps because they had a hunch, they didn’t call the police – the reason why this didn’t blow up was because they wanted to keep things under wraps.

This is all possible.

If they did call the police, it’d expose their failure in ‘raising their children’, so they didn’t – whilst not proper, it’s not impossible.

‘No, nothing of the sort. Please don’t worry.’

Having added that information, she squarely refuted my deduction. Having said that, even though she said ‘don’t worry’, it’s easier said than done.

‘The reason I say that is because the second night following Benikujaku-chan’s disappearance, the kidnapper took action.’

‘What? But didn’t you say the kidnapper didn’t do any threatening just now?’

‘What I said was, there was no *specific* action. No phone calls or ransom emails, no warning not to call the police or asking for billions of yen or anything of the sort – sorry for not making that clear. But the perpetrator really didn’t so much as say “I have your daughter” or something like that.’

It does appear that I’ve jumped to conclusions, though part of me suspects that Higasa-chan left those details out on purpose. We haven’t met for long, but I can tell Higasa-chan has that malicious side of hers.

However, solely in this case, I can also tell that her jumbled and disorganised testimony wasn't trying to throw me off – with something like *this*, it's really difficult to know where to begin.

Yes.

It wasn't something *specific*, it was something *direct*.

A message, tinged with pain.

'The second night, someone tossed one of Benikujaku-chan's front teeth into the Beniguchis' postbox without giving anything else.'

005

As night fell, I visited the Kitashirahebi Shrine. The setting sun awoke the disgraced shadow of a vampire, the blonde, gold-eyed young girl, Oshino Shinobu, who's now sitting on my shoulder, as per usual.

Joining us was someone who typically stayed with my youngest sister, the plush-pretending corpse doll, presumably having some free time on her hands, the *tsukumogami*, Ononoki Yotsugi – wait, what? Why?

'I see, now I understand. No wonder even as Araragi-san saw me in my cute year five schoolgirl state, he didn't launch into me, hug me tightly, and make weird noises – having just heard of a year five girl getting kidnapped, it'd be impudent to grab and hug this year five girl; it'd shift the whole topic.'

Nodding incessantly towards me – the visitor – was a year five primary schoolgirl. Or rather, a god.

The god that Kitashirahebi Shrine worships.

Hachikuji Mayoi.

If you look at her, she looks like any ten-year-old girl, but in actuality, she was killed in a traffic accident over a decade ago – a spirit-like existence.

She's also called a 'lost cow'.

She was almost swallowed by something called 'the darkness'.

There once was a snake god – I feel this explanation is getting messy real fast, but then again, what happened *was* pretty messy in the first place.

And I honestly can't find the energy to keep explaining any more.

'I agree. Besides, if we get into specifics, it might spoil people.'

‘As I’ve said, why do you think everybody’s starting from *this* book?’

Surely they’re a small minority?

‘Then again, I don’t think there’d be nobody starting from this book, so I do wish you’d give me a proper introduction. “Corpse doll” this, “corpse doll” that – Mister Vampy’s being all serious I see,[5] but please, call me a “tween girl” instead, like you’ve always done.’

Ononoki-chan requested expressionlessly and flatly – for she is a corpse. Her flat voice is making me feel pressured.

‘Seconded. Same applieth to me. I quake at the prospect of any soul mistaking me for a blonde, gold-eyed young lady, even amongst the most minor of minorities.’

‘You *are* a blonde, gold-eyed young girl.’

Everybody can see that.

A young girl on one shoulder, a tween girl following me, headed towards a shrine; who am I, some guardian in the summer festivities?

Not that I mind. Quite the contrary, in fact.

‘Please don’t, just because you like it. You’re making yourself really look like a kidnapper’, Ononoki-chan said. Even before I explained everything to Hachikuji (and Shinobu), she already seemed to know everything about that family – seems she’s been listening in earlier today through the room next door as I chatted with Higasa-chan.

And I thought she was outside this whole time…she’s always there whenever I don’t want her to be. Some good hearing she has.

Then again, Ononoki-chan wouldn’t be here were it not for my frequent mishaps in high school; I’m under her surveillance via Gaen-san, so I guess it’s inevitable for her to know what I’ve been up to – I could get into trouble again, after all.

Even as someone at uni.

‘Hu-hu-hu. At long last, it appears the Loli Trio, aka Lolio, have regrouped once again’, Hachikuji said.

The trio name thing aside, she seems happy.

Ononoki-chan remained expressionless; Shinobu was cringing at the sound of that name, but as far as this reunion goes, she seems okay with it…the young girl has come round, surprisingly. Even though her body hasn’t become rounder, it is still more rounded, cumulatively speaking.

‘However, Hachikuji. Can you refrain from saying “Loli Trio”? It doesn’t even get used in the audio commentaries, that. Even leaving Benikujaku-chan aside, the censors have been clamping down these days.’

‘Oh my. I didn’t know you were such a chicken, Loliligi-san.’

‘I don’t think I’ve ever heard anybody call me something that direct before, however, Hachikuji, it’s not Loli…Lolili…it isn’t some drug like Loxonin; my name is Araragi.’

‘You really *have* become a chicken! Whatever happened to the old programme? Loliligi-san’s completely unlike Loxonin. What happened to you, Araragi-san? Where’s the Araragi-san who’d lick a little girl’s eyes, who’d silence a young girl with a kiss, who’d happily get stepped on by a tween girl; where’s he gone?’

In prison, from the way you put it.

Don’t lift things out of context.

‘I’m under the impression that those were the tamer episodes, Mister Vampy…’

‘No, Ononoki-chan. Back when I got stomped on, it was *you* who took the initiative, right? With your foot. With your lovely steamed foot straight out from your boot.’

‘You lost me at “steamed foot”.’

Fair enough.

It's true that countless crimes have been documented and published; I don't know for how much longer those book stores are going to stock those older volumes, which is to say the people who started from this book might shockingly *not* be in the minority.

Let us then move forward like this is a debut novel.

Also, the highly questionable, barely publishable naming sense behind 'Loli Trio' aside, I believe we have assembled the strongest possible line-up in searching for a kidnapped year five schoolgirl.

Hachikuji may have said 'at long last', but when *was* the last time all of us were together?

Yes, there was the 'mummy incident', but I feel that was less a team and more a series of coincidental bumpings-in…so would I have to go back to right before I graduated high school, when I was about to face Ougi-chan?

Then again, as Shinobu's face tells, the three of them couldn't be said to share a good relationship…even so, I wouldn't dare say they couldn't be trusted upon.

Yes, it may look like a mystery uni student went up a secluded shrine to play with some young kids at night, which isn't exactly a good look, but I'll just have to hold that thought for now…

Neither am I dwelling upon how that paragraph reflects poorly on law enforcement around this neighbourhood.

'A difficult call, this is. But, thee. As thy servant, I wish not to be critical of thine habit of helping others, yet would the local constabulary not be more suited to a task of this nature, perchance?' Shinobu said.

She may say she wouldn't complain, but it's plain to see that without any doughnuts coming her way, she feels she isn't being justly rewarded.

'Would notifying the authorities this instant not what thou ought to do? Thou should take over and continue the work those negligent parents failed in.'

She may have been a legendary vampire from a faraway land of a faraway time, but she did say something completely sensible – she's completely assimilated into modern Japanese life.

Back when Shinobu was feeding on my blood, she was the 'master', so there is a certain amusement in seeing her with the same self-important manner, even though she now has to refer to herself as a 'servant' – as for me, I've always seen her as an equal partner.

'I'll do that if I really have to, but I don't think now is the time. This is all solely from Higasa-chan, and I haven't checked if it's true myself – so I'll start with that. I'll let Ononoki-chan do it.'

'Ye dun' min me?'

I was met with a Kansai dialect retort. An expressionless Kansai dialect retort.

Then again, considering that the corpse doll's 'master' is the violent *onmyōji* Kagenui Yozuru, it's only natural for her to have picked up a few Kansai phrases.

Ononoki-chan is, after all, an oddity who's easily affected by her surroundings – anyway, it is true that Ononoki-chan's an expert on investigating, so verification should be in her wheelhouse.

She's highly mobile, and also highly adaptable.

Leaving Shinobu (who's tied to my shadow, together with me on the same boat, and inextricably tied together with my movements) aside, I wasn't going to give Ononoki-chan any extra work on top of having to watch me, but now that she's here, I might as well give her something to do.

I'm using whoever I can get my hands on, even if it's a tween girl.

'Hmph. Sure, then, I suppose. To kidnap a ten-year-old girl and send her parents her tooth, such a person is closer to a monster than a human being.'

And with that, Ononoki-chan found an excuse to labour in her off-hours – well, she is basically right though.

Back in the day, with such a heinous crime, it'd be reasonable to point to oddities as a cause; even if a kidnapper *does* show up, they'd be treated as an oddity too – in short, what matters now is figuring out what exactly we're dealing with.

'But in return, I'd like to ask for your loving affection once this is done.'

'Shut up, don't say it like we've been there before. Showering you with affection is something I've never done, not even in high school.'

'So what do you want me to do?'

As the watcher and the watched finished their conversation, or should I say, as we finished our usual banter, the god – Hachikuji – raised her hand.

'Shinobu-san's tied to your shadow, and Ononoki-san's there to watch you, so it's only expected for them to move together with Araragi-san; but for you to visit my shrine in the dead of the night, that has to be out of your own will. So tell me, Araragi-san, what do you ask of god?'

She's a good conversationalist.

Perhaps it shows she's becoming a more godly figure – even though from the outside, nothing's changed from when I first located her in town.

She still looks like a ten-year-old girl.

'Araragi-san, I may as well say this early on. You've been rounding my age to ten years old, but need I remind you that I'm actually eleven? Just as Shinobu-san is actually five hundred and ninety-eight years old.'

'Allow me to correct thee. I am now five hundred and ninety-nine years of age. Probably.'

'Pretty sure you're officially set as ten now. Besides, doesn't "Nijūichikuji-onee-san" roll off the tongue nicer than "Nijūnikuji-

onee-san”?’[6]

‘What does that onee-san have to do with this? Isn’t that character not part of this world?’

‘Anyway, I’m not asking for divine intervention. None of this unreasonable “use your divine powers to catch the kidnapper” business – all I want is some of your perspective. Not as a god, but from back when you’re a lost cow.’

‘When I was a lost cow? Hmm.’

Hachikuji nodded.

She nods whenever she doesn’t get something.

I’ll make a retraction here and say she’s still not used to being a god – not that that’s a bad thing this time around.

Because what I’m after this time is Hachikuji’s experiences *before she became a god* – yes, we’re going to have to take action at some point, but if we get the premise wrong, then that wouldn’t help at all.

‘Higasa-chan may have crossed this off, but I still think this kidnapping might simply be the kid leaving home *out of her own will*.’

‘Huh?’

From her reaction, it seems Hachikuji still doesn’t quite get it – seems I’ll have to go the extra mile just to ask god for help.

She’s not observant on that front.

‘So that is why, as thou say, “now is not the time”, my master? If she merely took leave from her abode, to involve the police would see her desire to return home all but vanish.’

Conversely, having left behind country after country, the well-travelled vampire got what I meant instantly.

‘Mm hmm.’

I continued.

‘From what I can tell in this game of telephone, the parents don’t seem to be doing their job quite properly, and the home itself isn’t exactly ideal for a year five primary schoolgirl…even so, the thought of running away from home has surely crossed everybody’s mind at some point.’

‘So that could be why the parents haven’t noticed even if Benikujaku-chan left home alone – perhaps she left precisely because her parents are the kind not to notice. That could be a valid deduction. However, Loliligi-san –’

‘Stop trying to make “Loliligi-san” a thing.’

‘I blame you for not doing our regular programme. It’s all clogged up in my system now. And all because you haven’t finished your part yet, Loliligi-san.’

‘Sheesh, if you insist. I am not Loli…Loliki…I am not the trickster god, Loki; my name is Araragi.’

‘That’s a cool one; Loki, the trickster god. I guess you can call it a god-tier comeback. A trickster-god-tier comeback.’

Thus, with Hachikuji astounded, we completed the sequence (she really is a stickler for the rules, isn’t she?).

‘But what about the front tooth? The front tooth that came from Benikujaku-chan. You can’t say that was a trick of some sort’, Hachikuji continued.

‘Mm, that’d be Higasa-chan’s counter-argument, which was enough to convince me then. Yet unlike giving them a heart, you can definitely stage giving them a tooth.’

‘Stage? What? So you’re saying she pulled out her own tooth and tossed it in the postbox? Araragi-san, is that what you think a year five primary schoolgirl is capable of? Not everybody likes hurting themselves the same way Araragi-san does’, Hachikuji replied.

Whilst that did happen, it's not like I wanted it to happen…

Yes, I admit, I have my self-flagellating tendencies, but now that I'm at uni, I do want to avoid these situations as much as I can – I don't want a repeat of what happened in term three.

'Oh, I know exactly what goes on when you're a year five primary schoolkid. It's about the time they get replaced, don't they?'

'Replaced? What gets replaced?'

'Their teeth.'

006

In summation, the tooth that went unceremoniously into the postbox was actually Benikujaku-chan's *milk tooth*; at least, that's what I imagined – no, that's what I wished was true.

It was a far better image than the sixth person ripping that girl's tooth out with a pair of pliers…obviously, the superior image would be the Beniguchis not being a family who made running away a preferable prospect.

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way – so goes a famous quote, though even if the latter is true, I've yet to see an example of the former.

'Hmph. Seems thou art familiar with year five schoolkids. Colour me impressed.'

Whilst I had mixed feelings on her airing out my inner thoughts, the bond between Shinobu and I means it's pretty rare to hear her praise me.

'So in other words, her milk tooth fell whilst she was outdoors, so she left it in the postbox?'

'It could be the opposite. Perhaps losing her milk tooth presented an opportunity for her to leave home – as for me, it's been so long since my first tooth fell out, I don't remember what it was like.'

I was in primary school then, after all.

When Higasa-chan heard about the front tooth, she must've imagined Benikujaku-chan in immense pain; not necessarily as painful as having a heart hollowed out, but at least as painful as having a finger chopped off or an eyeball dug out – anybody would've thought that.

But if she's a primary schoolgirl, then that might not be the case… when people are aráten, losing their teeth is actually considered a proof of *growth*.

Something worth celebrating.

‘Ignoring the utter enigma behind shortening “around ten” to “aráten”, such a theory isn’t impossible…thing is, there’s nothing much we can say about this. Unlike what our appearances would suggest, our experiences as *petites filles* have been long lost to time, so none of this means anything to all three of us’, Ononoki-chan said, breaking down my words.

This is teeth talk, after all.

‘To be incentivised to leave home as soon as her first tooth fell and she felt herself to be growing, such a deduction leaves much room to be desired. It sounds awfully like her sister moving out once she’s eighteen. Maybe she learned it from her older stepsister…’

‘Maybe she can’t wait to be eighteen, so she lowered that hurdle compared to her sister…’

‘But Vampsire – Vampsire being short for Mister Vampy – I heard it’s Japanese tradition to throw your upper milk teeth down to the ground, and to throw your lower milk teeth up onto the roof; what tradition would throwing your milk tooth into the postbox constitute? To which direction are we throwing our teeth to now?’

‘Well, there are two possible answers to your question I can think of.’

‘Wow, Mister Vampy, I can’t believe you know the word “two”.’

‘If you’re going to be surprised, be surprised I have two answers…’

I continued.

‘So, first…

Knowing full well I can’t do it as well as Higasa-chan did – nevertheless,

‘She could be flustered and left her front tooth in the postbox because she didn’t know what to do – it is her own tooth, after all, so she’d be hesitant in throwing it in the bin, though honestly it’d

be strange if kids these days know about the tradition Ononoki-chan just spoke of…if that front tooth fell during her way home from school, and she decided to leave home then and there, then placing it in the postbox would be a good compromise.'

'Compromise…so, my master, she proceeded to depart her home in silence?'

Shinobu said, folding her arms.

She may be an unwilling participant, but it seems she's interested in this conversation in her own way.

'It may be true that the tooth was discovered the second night she disappeared, but it may not be the moment when that teeth was deposited. Ka-ka. Do those parents treat their postbox with equal neglect as their issue?'

Issue, she said.

You've never said that before, have you?

Don't go and change your character just because it's a new Season.

Then again, she could be right…even if they diligently checked their postbox every day, a single tooth down in the corner is something too easy to miss.

'However, Shinobu. I find the second answer more probable – that is, when Benikujaku-chan noticed that her parents were oblivious to the fact that she's gone, she then came back home to sneak a tooth in the postbox in order to incite them.'

'Ah, I see, my master. Staged, as thou said. Hm.'

Shinobu said, as if replaying that earlier conversation.

Not that there was any special meaning behind using that word, it just slipped from my mind – perhaps stemming from a subconscious desire.

A stock saying blurted out without having taken stock.

Moving on, if the second instance was true, at least we can deduce that she isn't far from home – whereas if it was the former, we'd have no idea how far she could be from home.

If it was as cute as 'leaving home, but not far enough so that she can peek at what's happening back there', then our search would be much easier…of course, in reality, there can be many other possibilities other than the two I've mentioned.

One of the more probable ones being 'Benikujaku-chan was plainly kidnapped by an odd kidnapper'; such a possibility we cannot ignore.

At the same time, we cannot lose sight of hope.

It is hope after all.

'We must cling onto hope in the same way as we desire to see small girls in a state of undress…'

'That final sentence was not needed, my master. My retorts are not needed at every turn.'

Shinobu stopped me as my partner.

She continued,

''Tis certainly more affectionate than "issue". I shall call her a "small girl" too hereafter.[7] The names of humans continue to elude me.'

It's not really *that* important…then again, it's far less cumbersome than 'the victim of the kidnapping who's in year five of primary school'.

Even so, simply calling her a 'victim child' would also be putting it too strongly…since that would involve a scenario I wished didn't happen, I guess I have no qualms about Shinobu saying 'small girl'.

Besides, it's way more common.

That 'Benikujaku' is a more memorable name is only a human

thing.

‘True. We don’t even know what Benikujaku-chan looks like, so giving her a nickname this soon would be in bad taste. Couldn’t we just name her after Mister Vampy’s type? You know, small as a transistor and slim to boot – Transistor Slender.’[8]

‘What’s “Transistor Slender” supposed to mean? Isn’t that just a normal child who’s a bit thin?’

But it is true that I have no idea what Benikujaku-chan looks like – this is a few connections too far, and Higasa-chan has no info on her looks either.

Mitonon probably has no idea either – even if she did, there’s a chance she has bad intel, such is the nature of the game of telephone.

‘Now I’m starting to get why Araragi-san would visit here. In the middle of the night.’

‘I’m saying this right now, wasn’t it more convenient for me to look for you at night? You know, given you’re…’

‘A god of strolling, indeed.’

‘No, you’re –’

‘Yep. A god of lost children.’

Hachikuji said with a smirk.

‘I am an expert on not heading home, and I’m also an expert who *can’t* go home. In other words, my bounceless experience could come in useful in searching for Benikujaku-chan’s whereabouts after she left home. Is that what Araragi-san’s saying?’

More or less.

I didn’t say anything about bounceless experience though.[9]

‘The worst case scenario is of course there actually being an evil

kidnapper, but even if there isn't, a year five kid on her own for even a few days would already cause quite a stir, not to mention the bad press. Therefore, it's our job to find and guard her ASAP, otherwise I can't see anything good happen if this gets dragged on.'

'What say ye? Is it not meant to be for this kidnapper to receive an old-fashioned beating?'

'Only if we have to, though even then I believe it's a job better left for the police. I'm sure it's not a good thing if I get addicted to stuff like this anyway.'

'How so?'

Ononoki-chan asked.

Given I'm under her watch, I'd have to answer carefully – careful in choosing my words.

'Be it vampires or gods, for me to lend supernatural powers to *lay down my vision of justice* – that's the thing I'm scared of getting addicted to.'

It wouldn't just be bad, it'd spell the end of me.

To borrow from the specialist Oshino Meme, 'if you do that, you're no longer human'.

Therefore, I shouldn't work towards justice, but kindness – this is Araragi Koyomi's line in the sand.

Drawn after that turbulent time in high school, drawn as a university student.

'I see you've put some thought before diving head-first and saving another girl, another Transistor Slender whom you've never met, Mister Vampy. Then fine, I won't kill you for now.'

'Wait…what? Your clearance is such that you can kill me any time, Ononoki-chan?'

Also, don't preface it with all this Transistor Slender business…I

don't want 'because she's Transistor Slender' to be the reason I save her.

I may have borrowed from Oshino just now, but not everything from that Hawaiian-shirt-wearing, middle-aged man I agree with – I don't think 'people can only save themselves'.

People can be saved, even if they're five circles away.

That's where the supernatural powers come in.

'You never think about consequences, Mister Vampy. Or should I say, you only look at what's in front of you.'

Ononoki-chan did once say that I should avoid committing to something too odd, otherwise it'd conflict with the story four years later – but if that's the case, then you shouldn't have mentioned that something would happen in four years…

What, is it the story of me becoming a rock star?

'If asked something like "which would you rather have, ten thousand yen today or eleven thousand yen tomorrow", Mister Vampy's the type who'd answer "today" without hesitation. Now of course, that's not necessarily a wrong choice – intuitively, you'd imagine "tomorrow" would be the smarter option, and that those who chose "today" would be impatient, but that's not what behavioural economics would say; taking eleven thousand yen tomorrow might not leave you better off, since you never know if you can even make it to tomorrow.'

'……'

The corpse doll started talking about behavioural economics for no reason…quite a scary story she's telling, too.

'Even if one makes it to tomorrow alive, there's also a chance that whoever was giving the money to go back on their word, so taking the money right then and there could be considered the more practical option, compared to the uncertainty in choosing to take the money tomorrow. It may not be clever, but it is grounded. In a sense, it's buying twenty-four hours with a thousand yen – which,

to bring us back, means I don't think there's anything wrong in rushing ahead and saving people. There's no need to think about questions like "is it good for lil' Transistor Slender if I saved her" or something like that.'

I don't think calling Transistor Slender 'Transistor Slender' would do any good for Transistor Slender…but I understand what she meant.

Although I don't quite get why she said what she said to me…I'm not that rash, I think.

Everything I do is well thought out.

Perhaps what I'm doing here is pointless, but at least I have the extra strength for it – I'm in that moratorium period known as 'uni life'.

…No.

That's not all.

I may be saving people, but I'm not doing it selflessly – not like Hanekawa. Or perhaps that's exactly what went through her mind when she did what she did with me in spring break?

Anyway – Hanekawa.

Hanekawa Tsubasa, I mean.

'I wouldn't shy from providing assistance, but there's one thing I'd like to ask after hearing all that.'

Hachikuji said.

Looks like she understood things enough to raise a question.

'If it turns out she wasn't kidnapped but ran away herself, then of course I'd agree to give her protection; I'd even regale her my experiences, but Araragi-san, what're you going to do with her after that? Send her back –'

‘Sending her back home is not an option’, I interrupted.

No, *not* sending her home after protecting her is, as I think of it now, quite a terrifying prospect too, but that’s not exactly what I meant.

I’m not proposing something as sinister as kidnapping a child who ran away from home.

‘Even if you believed only half of what Higasa-chan said when she said “what I say stays in this room” –’

‘Come to think of it, the moment you started telling us, “what I say stays in this room” has become null and void. For you to spill a secret to three people at once, you really aren’t tight-lipped at all. Careful, or I’ll literally seal your lips.’

‘– Even if you believed only half of what she said, the part where the family is said to make running away a better choice deserves further attention. To send a child back where she escaped from could result in greater tragedy, and that’s a story I want no part in.’

‘Well, no matter what happens, listening to her – the small girl – and what she has to say would be paramount when making further decisions.’

It seems Hachikuji prefers ‘small girl’ over ‘Transistor Slender’ – not a surprise. Only Ononoki-chan would say something like Transistor Slender.

‘So then, is it reasonable to assume that by “protecting her” Araragi-san meant taking her to your house?’

‘It’s not infeasible…although I’m sure my parents would have a few words for me if I, a uni student, brought a year five girl home.’

‘Dare I venture that this goeth far beyond “having a few words”…’

‘Actually, Araragi-san, didn’t you forcefully yank me back to your house that other time? You know, with me as a year five girl?’

‘Shh!’

‘Why are you shushing me?’

‘That short story’s difficult to get a hold of anyway, it’s all fine.’

‘I feel there’ll be a compilation of all of them sooner or later…’

Oh no.

I was talking about having the spare capacity to save people, but now I’m facing a major crisis…hang on, that’s not what I was talking about.

‘Hitagi’s in the girls’ dorms, and that’s heavily guarded. So I’m thinking of asking Sodachi for help. She lives alone, so there’s no problem in her hiding a small child.’

‘Thou may ask plenty favours from thy truculent childhood playmate, but surely thou should notice by now that she despiseth thee?’

‘Wouldn’t that make big sis Oikura the kidnapper?’

Big sis Oikura.

The two have never met, and yet Hachikuji sounds really close with her.

‘Not a problem. She doesn’t care if she’s breaking the law or not.’

‘Wouldn’t that be a very big problem?’

Well, it is a big problem, but there is one reason why I’m doing this.

Oikura isn’t the type to do things ‘for others’, let alone ‘saving others’ (she can tear her mouth apart, or have her mouth be torn apart before she would even say such a thing), yet even so, she has exception for small girls with tragic upbringings.

Because as far as Oikura is concerned, that’d be the same as saving herself –

‘So I want to exploit this weak spot of hers.’

‘Dón’ callit a weak spot.’

‘Dón’ callit a weak spot.’

‘Dón’ callit a weak spot.’

I was met with a simultaneous triple retort from all three directions, from the young girl, the little girl, and the tween girl – I don’t know what synchronisation this is; the young girl and little girl even changed their tone.

Mm, I can’t call it a weak spot.

Incidentally, my lover, Senjougahara Hitagi, who’s not an option here due to her dorm’s security, she similarly had a horrendous upbringing, but sadly she’s the type of person who ‘hates their own past’, so she’d take no exception to taking in a small girl.

If anything, she might be deadly strict with her.

I can’t let her become her past self – so even if she lived alone and not in the dorms, I still wouldn’t ask for her help.

It’s more trouble than it’s worth.

She wouldn’t show up until the epilogue anyway.

‘Now obviously, if the Beniguchis turn out to be fine, then we’ll of course send her back. That’s the scenario I’m hoping for – best to have it just be a dud.’

‘Best to have some freshly-let blood?’

Shinobu, the former vampire she is, managed to mishear that this badly; anyway, this is what’s going to happen. In short:

①: Ask Ononoki-chan to investigate the Beniguchi household.

②: Shinobu and I will search for Benikujaku-chan in the meantime.

③: If it is a kidnapping, then leave it to the police and make a clean exit.

③ being the most important part.

I have to be careful, otherwise I'll cross the line.

'Wait, what? So I don't have to help with ① or ②? Even though I'm a god?'

'I'd like you to, but it is true that Benikujaku-chan's home is in the next town over. As the god of this town, surely it's not good for you to be outside of it for long?'

Overenthusiastic walks aren't necessarily a good thing.

It'd be bad if it became an excursion.

Once one becomes a god, one's freedom of movement decreases… well, at least there's one thing the world of oddities has in common with human society.

The further you climb up the ladder, the further you are tied down, or something like that.

'I can go out if I want to. After all, as a god in Japan, I'm expected to be at Izumo during the tenth month – maybe I'll walk there.'

Why is she more free-spirited than before she became a god?

Really tricky to deal with, these folks can be.

Stop making yourself more free.

'But since Araragi-san was being considerate, I would not waste Araragi-san's goodwill. I don't want to end up in hell. As a god, I should at least act more like one. Dignified. Serious.'

'So it shall be. Your advice already helps a lot.'

Well, leaving aside whether she could make it, and leaving aside the tenth month being traditionally called 'the month without gods', I still think it's best not to leave the Kitashirahebi Shrine empty – the lengthy hiatus of the divine has brought many calamities upon this town before.

It'd be too early to call those tragedies 'memories'.

'Mm. Indeed. The absence of the divine wrought upon even myself, the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, a most terrible affliction.'

'No, Shinobu, you're fine. You've no idea how full you've made my life since we met. Come, want to sit on my thigh?'

'Mm? I see. If thou insistest, then it cannot be helped.'

'Quit flirtin', ya gobshite.'

Ononoki-chan gave a strong retort.

I can feel her watchful glare, even if she's totally expressionless.

'I'll lop ye leg off.'

'I didn't know you were such a terrifying oddity, Ononoki-chan…'

'I can assure you I am not; I'm in fact quite gentle. I find myself quite affected by your affinity towards saving people. Plus, to rope me in, someone who's supposed to be watching over you at home, and put me to use, I do like that side of you.'

'So you do like me after all.'

'That's more because I'm a *shikigami*, a *tsukumogami*, which is to say, an implement. I'm glad if people find good use for me.'

I see, an easily understandable principle.

From that, one can deduce that the violent *onmyōji* Kagenui-san, and her superior, Gaen Izuko-san, both manage to use Ononoki-chan as a tool superlatively, and eke out the greatest performance from her.

It'd be difficult if I were asked to do it on the same level as them. I'll still give it my all though.

'So then, while Mister Vampy and that young girl seductress go and

do god's work, I shall investigate the Beniguchis.'

She may be full of complaints, and I can't tell otherwise due to her expressionless face, but even though the job is quite far away from her wheelhouse, she still seems genuinely happy about having something to do.

Much as I don't want to ruin this moment,

'Sorry, Ononoki-chan. We might know they're in the next town over, but we don't know their exact address.'

I still feel obliged to give her every detail.

With what little I have, the most I can say is that Mitonon's senpai from middle school's younger sister is definitely not in this town – Higasa-chan and Mitonon were teammates, so she'd know where Mitonon lives.

The Beniguchis, in turn, would be in the same school district as the Shounous…but even if it was the next town over, I'd have no idea *which* cardinal direction I should head towards.

As far as the next town over is concerned, our town's the next town over…and perhaps, just as 'friend' became 'friend of a friend', maybe 'the next town over' is actually two towns away. It might be possible if the middle school was a private school, and to stretch this further, once that senpai hit eighteen and moved out, maybe the Beniguchis moved too.

'It's okay, Vampsire. I'm a pro.'

How reassuring.

Seems she has the know-how when it comes to searching for people.

There was a time when I paired up with Ougi-chan and we'd do our mystery-like segment, but I guess the real detective was under my nose all along.

'Yes, the know-how of going through every front door and looking at the nameplates.'

‘Well that’s not good.’

Okay, so less detective, more beat officer.

My parents might be proud of that, though.

‘Just kidding. But looking people up really is one of my specialities – I’m also good at going back up a chain of “rumours”. I’ll contact you one by one once I have something.’

‘Mm. Send me a text.’

‘Apologies, my child’s phone couldn’t do texting…I’m not that good at talking over the phone either, so I’ll just tell you in person if I find something.’

Uh…wouldn’t that be a lot of trouble too?

It’d be a lot of moving back and forth, and Ononoki-chan would have no idea where I’d be then.

If I see a *shikigami* as a tool, then I can understand that tools don’t use tools very well…actually, come to think of it, I don’t see Ononoki-chan using weapons much.

‘What about it? Even if Mister Vampy and the seductress vampire were on the other side of the earth, I’ll still know where you are.’

‘I let it slide the first instance I heard it, but I say, thee. The next time thou callest me a seductress vampire will be thy last.’

‘It was a compliment towards your heart-stopping aura. Then instead of calling you a young girl seductress, I shall call you a young golden seductress.’

‘I find that quite awesome…’

Oi, don’t let it get to you.

You’re better than that nickname.

You just went wild because you heard the word ‘gold’, didn’t you?

‘Anyway, Mister Vampy, movement isn’t a problem for me. You may say it’s a lot of back and forth, but I can handle it fine. I’ll just come back the same way as I leave.’

‘The same way as you…how?’

‘Like this.’

Ononoki-chan, the corpse doll, stood up all of a sudden.

‘Unlimited Rulebook.’

As soon as she uttered those words, she rocketed towards the skies.

007

With Ononoki-chan saying that, I'm reminded of her serving as a 'transportational tool' for her master, Kagenui-san – then perhaps the skill of making their body (their dead body) explosively rocket towards the skies with the 'Unlimited Rulebook' is in fact a necessary technique for experts.

Anyway, in the end, I can't rely on her to do what I want every time; a situation like this is only an irregularity…this I have to keep in mind.

It may be an act of kindness and not of justice, but in a sense, it'd still be dangerous to be complacent in relying on others for help – Ononoki-chan may have said what she said using behavioural economics, but it's still better to think about the before-and-afters, otherwise I'll end up on a self-destructive path.

Not that it's the first time that happened.

Having said that, it's already too late now to think of consequences – now is the time for some solid action; no use in wasting time.

Even if I didn't think about the consequences, I shouldn't regret it.

That's the mentality I'm moving forward with tonight.

'I cannot lose to Ononoki-san too. As a pro in lost children, allow me to act as a consultant for Araragi-san.'

Hachikuji took the helm after Ononoki-chan left (launched?).

'Well, in any case, we'll need to wait for Ononoki-san's results to determine how large a range we're going to be combing through, but allow me to return to square one: don't forget that, ultimately, you're looking for a year five girl.'

'How can I forget it. With a year five human girl at stake, one little mistake and I'll become a societal outcast.'

‘Thou speakest as if thou would be unscathed if thou wert a vampire, a spirit, or a corpse…’

‘The point I’m about to get to is that, as a small girl, Benikujaku-chan really could be “hiding anywhere” – since she’s small in size.’

I see.

That could be a surprising blind spot – if people were to assume that no person can hide in a grass field, then she could take advantage of that.

Now that she’s left home, this is essentially a giant game of tag – oh dear, I might no longer be a vampire, but I guess I’m still ‘it’.

‘It’s not only about size; a primary schoolkid could easily manage to wander to a place no adult could ever imagine. Back before I became a god, when I was a lost cow, I’ve made countless primary schoolkids get lost.’

‘I’ve always thought you were a harmless oddity, but now that you put it like that, I’m starting to have second thoughts…’

‘A primary schoolkid could just hop on top of walls, or go into drains, walk onto mountains or skip over fences. Barriers can mean nothing to them.’

Ahh…

That reminds me, Kanbaru used that exact method to avoid bumping into the lost cow…I thought it was some special technique only Kanbaru could pull off, but as it turns out, primary schoolchildren could do that too.

An agility only primary schoolkids have to ability to pull off.

‘And they wouldn’t care if they dirtied their clothes too. Compared to oddities, it might actually be trickier to look for a lost child.’

‘I see…that makes sense. At the very least, it’s not the same as looking for an adult.’

‘Well, maybe Benikujaku-chan’s grown past Transistor Slender, or even beyond school kids her age, and also dresses like an adult, too.’

Sensing my frustration, Hachikuji attempted to console me.

Words of consolation they may be, but a 170 centimetre-tall primary school kid is not unheard of, so I have to keep that possibility in mind too, lest I make a fool of myself.

‘May I suggest putting thy previous experience in searching for a cat to good use, my master?’

Shinobu said.

Searching for a cat?

This is something detectives often do…or at least, this is what they say as an act of self-deprecation. ‘I used to dream of becoming the next great detective, but it took me too long to find out that most private detective work revolve around love affairs or lost pets’, that sort of thing.

But to lump a child who left home with a cat doesn’t seem right… even if that suggestion came from an oddity –

‘Nay, nay. When I say searching for a cat, I meant *that* cat. ’Twas one time that cat of limitless knowledge went missing, and it took thy lover an entire night to locate her whereabouts – that was true, no?’

008

With her saying that, it did happen – no, it's just a rumour, and it's the kind of rumour that sends a shudder down my spine, so I'm not quite how true it is…the story was, with her family house burnt down, Hanekawa went to the ruins and spent the night there, before Hitagi found her with her own dogged persistence.

And as for those ruins, that is, the abandoned cram school, it too went up in flames, just like Hanekawa's house, so chances are Benikujaku-chan won't be hiding there, though there is some possibility that she'd be lurking in some other ruin.

Hanekawa's…how do I put it, 'sense of danger' back then, or more specifically her lack of, could be analogous to that of a naïve child…

'Speaking of, wasn't that originally Oshino's hiding place? If you can manage to get a hold of him, then you can ask him to tell you what other ruins there are.'

'Doth that not make him a specialist o' ruins? However, it was also thanks to him that my life was saved.'

'Indeed. At the very least, she'd want to avoid rain and wind, so she's probably somewhere with a roof over her head.'

Rain…I don't know what the weather's like the next town over, but I do know that rain is physically draining to deal with.

Back then, Hanekawa…it was to leave her burnt down house, but in a way, it too was running from home…

After that, she was found in the ruins having slept with a cardboard blanket, and after that she went to the Senjougaharas and the Araragis…how about this?

What are the chances that instead of going out alone, that year five girl found an understanding friend's place to lodge in?

Suppose the lost cow can be avoided by a simple ‘sorry to disturb’ at someone else’s house…

‘It may feel like a forbidden trick, but it is a simple solution that might actually work. Oh these crafty human beings with their crafty imagination…’

‘Don’t start saying things a god would say. I’m interviewing you as a lost cow.’

‘However, Benikujaku-chan wasn’t affected by a lost cow, so I wouldn’t say I know what happened to her. I may be a god, but I’m not omniscient.’

Hachikuji said, ending with a statement not unlike Hanekawa’s.

I don’t know everything, I just know what I know.

‘……’

Although now I’m perplexed.

Why did Shinobu say that former class representative could serve as reference then?

Some odd advice for her to give, given that she’s half-dragged into this against her own will, but that’s not the thing I’m surprised of… after all, Shinobu being disinterested is, in a sense, nothing new.

No, the thing that’s made me quizzical was her choosing that episode with the former class rep, and not the many other episodes we went through.

I only realised as she was saying all that, so I don’t intend to brag here, but Shinobu should’ve noticed it far sooner than I did – *she’s been there herself*, after all.

Leaving home, becoming lost.

Self-discovery would be another way of putting it.

Having went on excursion after excursion, to country after country,

after Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade's downfall that transformed her into Oshino Shinobu, she went missing once – since it was a young girl who went missing, I panicked like no other back then, and went all over town searching for her.

On that front, I remember working with the Hindering Cat too – but unlike this time, the line-up we had searching for her wasn't stellar at all.

No, then again, the cat did manage to find Shinobu after all, so I guess you could say we had the perfect team. It's all about having the right people at the right place at the right time…

Anyway, Shinobu has a far better example in her memory in the form of herself, so why would she bring up Hanekawa and not that time?

Could it be because I wasn't at town, so she thought I didn't know?

In fact, I had already learnt about that episode directly from one of the participants, Senjougahara Hitagi – she was very smug about it too.

See how tangled I am with Hanekawa?

Was the kind of feeling she went for.

But anyway, going back…then again, if you ask me whether Shinobu's eventual hiding place could help in finding Benikujaku-chan, the answer's a solid no. And as far as Shinobu is concerned, that episode of 'self-discovery' could be a shameful one she doesn't want to bring up, so the reason why she didn't say anything about that was purely because she didn't want anyone saying anything about it.

Then I'd best avoid that topic too.

Benikujaku-chan's more important right now.

Shinobu went quiet, so Hachikuji continued her lecture on lost children as a pro.

‘I never thought those ten-plus years of being tied to the ground could come in useful like this right now.’

She murmured quietly.

It may have just been an offhand remark, but if Hachikuji thinks that, then this discussion with her has gained additional significance.

Hachikuji was killed about eleven years ago on mother’s day by a traffic accident, when she was on her way visiting her mum’s house from her father’s house – it wasn’t the case with Shinobu, and I dare not link what happened then with Benikujaku-chan, but she could be heading toward the same fate.

I’ve been working on the assumption that she wasn’t kidnapped, but if it turns out Benikujaku-chan couldn’t make it out alive, then in the end, what was the point of doing all this?

Compared to making her way back home, making it back alive is far more important – in order to repay Hachikuji’s help, I found within myself a new wave of determination.

‘– Unlimited Rulebook.’

With those two words, Ononoki-chan returned back to this town – launching herself backwards, her skirt in the air, landing splendidly with her heels.

That was quick!

It felt almost like a boomerang the way she did it!

‘I’m back. I’ve found where the Beniguchis live.’

009

Such was Ononoki-chan's excellence that I wondered if I'll have anything else to do if this went on (if I don't, then nothing will top that. Nothing.), but it seems that she only found out where the Beniguchis were, and not how it was inside. The tween girl even said that normally, this wouldn't be worth reporting.

'But it seems this time, the rest of you guys alongside Mister Vampy would need to look for Transistor Slender together.'

'You've finally started talking to me like I'm scouting for models.'

'I rushed back here because I think it's important that you know the address. I'll be heading out again soon, and this time I'm going inside their house.'

This really is 'going back and forth'.

With such speed, then it stands to reason that she doesn't need to rely on such perks of civilisation that is the mobile phone – she's basically got the Anywhere Door from *Doraemon*.

Or the Zoom spell from *Dragon Quest*.

She may have said she had the know-how in searching for people, but it really could be her on the ground looking at the nameplates on house after house…in fact, if you ask me how she managed to come back so quickly, this would be the only solution I can think of.

'It really is the next town over. I was originally sceptical about the intel we have – I actually thought "what stays in this room" was a lie, but I didn't want to rain on Mister Vampy's parade. But the Beniguchis are a real family and they do exist, and so do their two daughters, Kujaku and Hibari [雲雀, lit. "skylark"].'

'Mm? How do you know so much?'

'Because it's all on the nameplate. Hibari's name was crossed out, so I deduced that it's the older sister who moved out. I can also tell

you what the parents' names are, though I'm worried it'll put Mister Vampy between a rock and a hard place.'

'A rock and a hard place…'

It might.

Given me, I could easily end up saying 'I guess it really can be hard being parents' or 'parents sometimes just don't have the time for their kids' – of course, they are perspectives that do need to be kept in mind, in the same vein as Ononoki-chan's ten thousand yen example.

If one doesn't get the ten thousand yen today, tomorrow would never come.

'What? Are we buying a year five girl for ten grand?'

'No we're not. How is that even possible?'

Neither will we be spending any time dwelling on the sale and purchase of year five schoolchildren (I've bid *adieu* to that Araragi-kun a long time ago), but suppose there is something that would no longer be on sale tomorrow, then it'd be no good waiting for the eleven thousand yen tomorrow…I think it's better to earn that extra thousand yen some other way the next day.

At least, that's what I'm thinking.

'It's fine, tell me the names of the parents too. You never know when it'll crop up, so I might as well remember them.'

I asked of Ononoki-chan.

I'm not trying to make some grand statement out of this, but now that 'Mitonon's senpai from middle school' has a name, called Beniguchi Hibari, everything seems to jump out more.

The story feels more real.

Up until just now, what seems like something that happened in a faraway world is taking shape – so even though I said I 'never know

when it'll crop up' when my hunch is it'll probably never crop up, I still wanted to know their names.

Besides, though it may not be for insurance, it could act as a sort of brake…an ABS.

To worry about someone so much that I couldn't think of anything else has happened so many times, it's starting to get annoying… if I get too hung up on what Ononoki-chan prefers to describe as Transistor Slender to the extent where I end up harming others, then maybe we can abandon 'father' and 'mother', and see them as individuals; yes.

It wasn't like that time.

'Mm, I think that's proper, Mister Vampy. If anything, if you'd answered "don't tell me", I'd have killed you.'

'Why are you so keen on killing me? If I'm choosing between life and death this often, statistically I'm a dead man by the end of tonight.'

'Strong words such as "abandonment", "neglect", or even "domestic violence" are so strong that any mention of them and people would be inclined to believe you less; nevertheless, it's important to keep in mind that such atrocities have happened in real life. The father's name is Beniguchi Mikiyoshi [紅口幹吉, lit. "trunk of good fortunes"], and the mother's name is Beniguchi Toyoko [紅口豊子, lit. "plentiful child"].'

Those names sound normal.

Anticlimactic, even…even though they'd name their daughters 'skylark' and 'peafowl'…no, wait, what? Are we sure they're not related by blood?

They're both named after avians, and their names both contain 雀; they sound more like twins than they do stepsisters…or was this pure coincidence?

'I haven't gone this far into the investigation yet, but it could be possible. A single father and a single mother bonding over the two

children they had custody for respectively, who end up tying the knot.'

'…Whilst you might be right, isn't that a bit random for a reason to marry? Look, I might not be the right person to say this, but marriage is pretty important as far as life events go. At least I wouldn't propose to Hitagi before having thought about our future.'

'I think not.'

'I think not.'

'I think not.'

I was met once again by a triple retort from the tween girl, the young girl, and the little girl – a formation like that isn't playing fair.

How am I supposed to reply to a triple retort?

Stop silencing me at every turn.

'But I agree, it does seem rather unthoughtful of them.'

Ononoki-chan said after witnessing my sullen face.

'Wouldn't that be *exactly* a reason for them to fall apart though? Wouldn't that be *exactly* the sort of thing that makes their kids want to leave home?'

'……'

'Well, that's what the investigation's for. Perhaps the two sisters who came from different families are related by blood. Call it a family tree mystery.'

'The hell's that supposed to mean?'

I like the sound of it, but I don't think it's a genre.

They're actually blood sisters?

It would be a surprising truth, though given the kanji, the

foreshadowing would be a bit on the nose…

Leaving how the parents met aside, it is true that Mitonon's senpai – that is, Beniguchi Hibari – cares about her little sister deeply, despite the wide age gap; it could be because their names have a lot in common.

'Agreed. The reason I get along so well with Mister Vampy is because both our names have 木 in them.'

'That's not the reason why.'

Otherwise I should be all buddy-buddy with that swindler as well.

Give me a break, man.

I don't know if I'd even describe Ononoki-chan and I as good friends…need I remind everybody that this is the corpse doll who throws me a two-choice, life or death decision every half hour.

If it weren't for her looking like a tween girl, I'd have thrown this cursed doll away long ago, even if it belonged to my sister.

'So then, I think I should get going. Since we're going to the same place, do you want a lift or…?'

'No, I drove here…'

Even if I didn't, can I currently survive a high-speed transit on that tween girl? It's no longer that clear an answer…

I tried it once, when my sisters and Kanbaru were abducted, and deeply regretted it…I almost got altitude sickness.

Back then, my vampirism was, for better or worse, beyond a certain level, so I at least made it out alive…but right now, with my body condition, taking a ride on Ononoki-chan's 'Unlimited Rulebook' could be the end of me; this is no joke.

''Tis may come late, but come to think of it, thy sisters and thy junior were kidnapped at some point too.'

Ah.

Now that you mention it.

Come to think of it, Hanekawa had also been taken hostage because of me…these all had to do with oddities, so I inadvertently took them as exceptions, but even if the victims weren't small girls, it still doesn't change the fact that they were kidnappings.

If you look at it that way, then maybe I've been scared of thinking about it this entire time, but wouldn't it be more likely that this, too, was a kidnapping all along?

Well, if that is the case, then all I needed to do was select the appropriate response, that is '③: making a clean exit'. This is an approach I'll continue to stick with. If anything, I should be optimistic, and be glad that I've had experience relating to this, much as those experiences were ones I hated…as long as they come into use.

'So it's alright if I continued like this? Then I'll sneak into the Beniguchis and get the family tree sorted. Very much like Kindaichi Kōsuke [金田一耕助]. Call me Yodaichi Kōsuke [余田一耕助] from now on.'[10]

'I can barely tell you two apart…'

Going back, she did mention something like 'breaking in', but would something illegal like that even be possible? It is in the middle of the night, so we can't go around the vicinity or to school to find out what's going on, so the Beniguchi residence would be the only way, but still–

'No worries. I'm no vampire, so I can enter others' rooms without needing their permission. I'm using my locked room trick.'

'No, please don't use any locked room trickery.'

Whichever way you look at it, it's more like breaking into an empty nest…however, in order to avoid making any irrevocable mistakes, it is still better to find out what was going on inside the Beniguchis.

To find out what the parents are now up to.

Going through a sleepless night? Or…

‘With the kidnapping desk already sprung into action, there is of course the distinct possibility that they are silently waiting for the kidnapper to make a move, but if that happens, I will use my superb reflexes and pretend to be a plush. It’ll be fine.’

‘Will it though…?’

Forgive me for saying this, but the reason your disguise worked was because you were only dealing with my younger sister…

Eh, whatever.

I’ll leave her to it.

And by leaving her to it, I’m giving her full oversight.

‘Then I’ll see you later. When you’ve forgotten about it. “Unlimited Rulebook”.’

As she finished, Ononoki-chan once again shot up into the night sky – since it’s an ultimate technique fired off without warning, I’m always spooked every time it happens. This isn’t good for my heart.

Right then, now that I have Hachikuji’s professional advice, it’s about time we finished this conversation and head out ourselves – the address Ononoki-chan gave us is somewhere in the next town over that I’ve never been to before.

Not a surprise, since you don’t normally wander into a residential district in another town. Anyway, I should be covered with the map app on my phone. Obviously, I couldn’t look at it whilst driving, so –

‘Shinobu, you’re on navigation.’

‘I offer no objection, but, my master, since I have the opportunity, wouldst thou perchance remove the child safety seat on the passenger side?’

010

I've always thought Shinobu would be happy about having her own child seat on my Volkswagen New Beetle, but it seems like she doesn't like it.

Is it the colour?

But since we're in a hurry, and it takes a lot of effort just to remove it, she's going to have to suck up to it tonight. The show must go on.

'Nay, I can sit at the rear without problem.'

'Uhh sorry, the back's full of stuff too.'

'I see the vehicle's temperament followeth that of its master. Both cannot take very much.'

To have a former vampire criticise my personality is probably a reflection of how hopeless Araragi Koyomi is – with that, after thanking Hachikuji, I went down the mountain from the Kitashirahebi Shrine, got on my car, and drove to the neighbouring town.

Rushing down a mountain trail in the middle of the night is a big, dangerous no-no, but fortunately our night vision was still alright, so we made it down without much trouble – although just as a precaution, I hugged onto Shinobu as we made our way down, since having her sit on my shoulder might pose some challenges for my balance.

'Now that I think of it, it was right for me to consult Hachikuji first. Right after I heard Higasa-chan's "this only stays in this room", I was tempted to leap into action, but after hearing what Hachikuji had to say, I feel like I now have complete know-how of searching little girls who ran away from home.'

'Dare I say that was a truly adventurous statement…'

‘By the way, Shinobu, you were about to say something to me?’

‘I have plenty to say, yea; another was added to the list just now. But what wert thou trying to get to?’

‘Don’t play dumb with me. How long do you think we’ve been together?’

‘It hath only been one year.’

Huh.

Feels like it’s been twelve years to me.

‘Didn’t you force in that Hanekawa anecdote at that convenient timing? Something about it being reference for someone leaving home. Since it wasn’t off-kilter enough for an instant comment, I just let it slide, but now that it’s just the two of us, I’m bothered by it again all of a sudden.’

‘If thou had let it slide before, then leave it be. It seemeth my master hath taken quite a liking to sticking his nose in the strangest of places.’

‘Didn’t we make a promise to hide nothing about oddities to each other?’

‘That vow was with a different woman, was it not? Which woman art thou mistaking me with?’

Hitagi-san, of all people.

It goes without saying I haven’t yet reported today’s illegal search to Hitagi-san, but since this has nothing to do with oddities, it’s all okay.

‘I reckon this is within a grey zone…though this case concerneth a human, oddities make up three-quarters of the search team, no?’

‘So what? Anyway, what’s got you thinking about Hanekawa?’

‘Hmph.’

Either getting fed up with me asking questions, or having intended to play dumb with me to begin with, Shinobu went on:

‘Lo, turn rightwards in three hundred metres at the next junction.’

Returning to my phone, acting as my navigator.

‘The one who is thinking about her would be thee, no?’ She added.

Tugging on her seatbelt, as if unwilling to be on the child seat.

‘Thou may have said “now that it’s just the two of us, I am bothered all of a sudden”, but I would venture that, in front of the doll girl and the lost girl…correction, *lost god*, expounding on such detail would be improper. If thou mistook my words as a certain foreshadowing, I should apologise.’

‘…What? Something that’s difficult to say in front of Hachikuji and Ononoki-chan? Could it be about that new game you’ve made with your tail bone?’

‘Not in a million years. Not in eleven million years.’

‘Whilst that is easier to understand than “plendifermaxigargantuapocalypticalifragilisticexpialidocious”, it sounds like you’re denying the possibility of falling in love with an eleven-year-old.’[11]

‘So be it. Anyway, would it be prudent to regale to those two the thing about the tail bone?’

I wonder…

Amongst the two of them, one’s a god, and the other’s watching over me and could kill me if needed…

‘Simply put, ’twas purely because “that” happened before either of the other two met thee. Were I to expound on it, then both the doll girl and the lost god would be perplexed. As the elder, I should show some consideration.’

It’s true that between the young girl, the little girl, and the tween

girl (young girl being eight, little girl being ten, tween girl being twelve), Shinobu looks the youngest of the lot, but it's also true that between the three of them, Shinobu's actual age is also the oldest (the young girl's just under six hundred, the little girl's about twenty-one, the tween girl's about a hundred and twenty? When Gaen-san was at uni and made her a *shikigami*, the corpse was about a hundred years old…).

But I doubt whether this girl could show such considerateness.

As far as mental maturity goes, their looks don't deceive, and she really is the most childish of the trio…not that it matters anyway.

When it comes to things that happened before I met Ononoki-chan or Hachikuji – there's not a lot.

It was during last summer break when I met Ononoki-chan, and it was Mother's Day – that was, mid-May – when I first met Hachikuji.

Back then, Senjougahara Hitagi wasn't even on my contacts list… and to round things off, I first met Shinobu, that is, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, during spring break, so she's talking about something that happened between early April and early May.

If that's the case, then that could only be it.

Yes – the first incident with Hanekawa Tsubasa.

The 'Hindering Cat' – and with it, Black Hanekawa.

I see…in a sense, it's true that we've become partners in life and death, even if we haven't met for long.

It hasn't been long, but it's been intense.

She's seen right through me, hasn't she?

Or have her eyes been sharpened by the man who sees through everybody, the man in the Hawaiian shirt?

'That was back in that nightmarish Golden Week; back when you still won't talk to me – I always thought you didn't care what I did

back then.'

'What else can I say with thee borrowing my powers at critical junctures? Well, there is a difference between this and then. For thou to ask for my help at the start, surely 'tis a sign of improvement. Kaka. Isn't that so?'

Shinobu then let out a laugh – a pained, gruesome laugh.

I haven't seen her look like that in a long time.

'"*To not want this ending in failure just as back then*" – art thou not overlapping this faceless, ordinary girl with that former class representative as thou thought that? Art thou not moving forward with the determination to save the cat thou failed in saving last time?'

Looking for a cat, huh.

I guess she's right.

It's not something I can deny…whilst it wasn't something I'd blame on my subconscious, I saw the similarities from the beginning.

Neither can I comment much on Ononoki-chan breaking and entering, since I too didn't prepare myself and pried open the Hanekawa family back in that Golden Week – and I ended up hoist with my own petard.

I got my just deserts.

Not only that, I ended up running away as quickly as I could.

The relationship between Hanekawa Tsubasa and her foster parents scared me so much that I dashed away in tears.

With the thought that as a high schooler, there's zero hope for me in solving such 'familial matters', I tossed everything – everything, to Oshino Meme, and left him to deal with the rest.

Of all the things that happened in my third year of high school, the one during Golden Week was the most extreme of them all.

Nothing was mended.

In the end, Hanekawa Tsubasa herself resolved everything between her and her parents, including the cat, four months past that May day – I didn't help at all.

And that's fine.

Hanekawa Tsubasa was my saviour who lifted me in the spring break, but I didn't insist on saving her back – not that I've never thought of doing that, but from the beginning, my highest priority was safeguarding Hanekawa's safety, freedom, and happiness.

…But after she graduated high school, she didn't continue her studies even though she easily could've, instead choosing to roam the world in a lengthy overseas trip. As to how safe, how free, and how happy that makes her, that'd be a different story.

Point being, leaving that family was the best thing that happened to her – just like with Beniguchi Hibari.

That's why I was anxiously restless the whole time.

The same way Beniguchi Hibari feels about leaving her little sister at home – of course, I know that Benikujaku-chan and Hanekawa Tsubasa are two different people, and it goes without saying that Benikujaku-chan's not the only one in this sort of situation.

No two people go through the same thing, and no two people share the same perspective – each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

That said…I couldn't help myself in thinking about that.

The time in high school when I couldn't do anything.

The time when I couldn't face what was in front of me, so I ran away.

Perhaps now, I can do what I couldn't have – maybe I wouldn't run away this time.

I do fancy seeing myself growing too, even if just a little bit.

‘Go ahead and laugh all you want. Yes, I’m not helping out for selfless reasons – I want to take back that past me who failed. To kill that past me who thought that time that “something like this is beyond a kid like me”.’

‘There must be more to it. Is it not true thou desirest that small girl too?’

‘I desire small girls…?’

‘Sorry, I bit my tongue. Is it not true thou desirest to help that small girl too?’

Can you not slip-up such an originally beautiful line?

And to add in a ‘sorry, I bit my tongue’…just because Hachikuji didn’t get to say it, doesn’t mean you have to do it for her.

Some alliance between you two, this is.

‘Nay, was that not a good thing? ’Twas not my intent to rebuke thee. Is this not something important, too? The memory of thee escaping for thou thought “I cannot make it” is no good memory to bear – if thou wert to bear it ’til death, then that should prove quite meaningless a burden.’

‘Shinobu…’

‘So then, ’twas not my intent to blame, complain, or to criticise, well-timed it may be.’

Some rather specific intentions you said just now; you did think of them earlier, didn’t you?

‘Having learnt not thy lesson, and to impose on another stranger’s family business without prompting could end up with thine heart carrying greater trauma than before; that is why I have been reminding thee as a concerned grandmother would – as a concerned young girl would. This I shall say, if thou thinkest that former class representative’s family was bad, thou hast seen nothing yet.’

You really can't beat the perspective of a vampire who's lived with humanity for six centuries…then again, it's not that Hanekawa's family was special, it's more that Hanekawa herself was special.

'Thou art in thy first year of university. Would it not be too early to discard thy painful memories this soon? They can wait.'

'That small girl's not going to wait for me though, is she?'

'But of course. They grow up so fast.'

'No, that's not what I meant – the small girl won't wait for me to grow up, won't she? Because this is a problem that's happening right now, something that "stays in this room". Painful memories don't magically drop away like milk teeth. Humans, once they turn eighteen, have to force themselves into adulthood one way or another.'

It is inevitable for one to become strong, even if one needs to strong-arm oneself into it.

011

You may have noticed by now, but I didn't buy the car I'm driving – I may have said all this time that I bought it second-hand at a bargain during a clearance sale using my hard-earned cash from my part-time work, then restored it to my liking, but I admit all of that was just a bluff.

It's a brand new car my parents bought for me.

It's a lie I wanted to continue, but as someone who admittedly was raised and cared for by my parents for nineteen years, I want to build up the courage and be honest about it.

For completeness' sake, my love for my bicycle was real, though if I genuinely were to expound on that, it'd end up being a very long passage, so I'll liberally abridge that…anyway, as the golden child whose parents bought a car for, I have some expectations for it, that is, for it to be a powerful transportational tool – not to be all holier-than-thou, but I want to see a greater world with it.

And in reality, it did get bigger.

It feels like I could go anywhere in the world as long as I have it – well, then again, it's nothing compared to what Kagenui-san uses as transport, Ononoki Yotsugi's 'Unlimited Rulebook'.

In Kagenui's case, she's restricted in that she cannot walk on the ground, so I shouldn't compare myself to her – that person might not be a primary schoolgirl, but she could easily walk on walls better than Kanbaru.

While I thought that, we arrived at the next town over.

If I was still in high school, it would've taken much longer just to get to this starting point…hmm, with that alone, I feel like I can already do much more than before.

But with the car barely being something I got with my own hard work, unlike Kagenui-san with Ononoki-chan, I wouldn't say I'm

very good at handling it…more specifically, I'm still not very good at stopping it.

Yes.

Convenience comes at a cost…unlike bicycles, cars are the kings of society, but at the same time, if one has a car, one needs to park it.

Where should I park?

This is something that's never cropped up when I was still on my bike…no, there are designated places to park one's bicycle too, but a bicycle is not the same size as a car.

Right, let's just park around here!

– Isn't something you can do with a car.

If I park illegally, my car could end up towed, or I could have points taken off my license, and then there's the fear of someone breaking into my car…they don't teach this stuff in high school, and all these fears are racking up at the moment.

Additionally, since it's the middle of the night, back when I went up the Kitashirahebi Shrine, I parked my car on the shoulder that's normally used for emergencies (the Kitashirahebi Shrine, being a shrine where gods have descended, does not have a large car park next to it), but I only risked that because that was up on a mountain road, where there's little traffic both in cars and in people.

On a residential street?

Without a pedestrian road or a guardrail, if I parked at a random place in the middle of the night, chances are I'd be reported (the irony of someone contacting the police on an illegally-parked car but not over a missing child is not lost on me), and even if not, it is exceedingly likely that it'll end up in an accident.

I was hit by a car once, and it was a real tragedy…I do not wish that experience upon anyone else.

With that, before I start looking for Benikujaku-chan, I first looked

for a car park…having found a twenty-four-hour parkade,[12] I parked in there.

I know ‘parkade’ is a regionally-specific word, but I like the way it rolls off the tongue.

Like ‘parkade’, you know?

To park in a car park, high school me would’ve been livid over such expense.

He’d ask me where the money came from.

I don’t have a job, and I live at my parents’ house…well, I may have overlapped Beniguchi Hibari’s situation with my own, but that thought shows more vanity on my part.

But it wasn’t a lie when I say me and my parents were on bad terms when I was in high school – with that, although it took a bit of time in addition to moving about, all it took in total was about half an hour.

The night is long.

Let the search begin.

‘So, where do we start? My master. If, as the lost god advised, she is playing hide and seek, that should make it a monumentally difficult undertaking…’

To be unrestricted by common sense, to hide in some unimaginable place, that much was said – however, that was only the first part of Hachiikuji’s advice.

The first half, the first guess.

‘Hm. Then what about the second half?’

‘You didn’t hear the rest? Weren’t you literally there?’

‘’Twas in one ear and out the other.’

It's sincere advice, how could it go in one ear and out the other; then again, Shinobu wasn't the person in question…I say person in question, she's not even a human.

Shinobu may care about me, but she won't care about Benikujaku-chan…this is my trusted partner's line in the sand.

A wall – a fortification, if you will.

Though technically, I'm not the person in question either, but it's important to me to think like the person in question, otherwise I won't win this game of hide and seek.

Of course, all that is predicated on this actually being a game of hide and seek…

'She may have mentioned that I, as an adult…no, as a teenager, an "ex-child", that I can't get into the head of a small girl who left her home, and that there're a huge range of places to look for, from the top of walls to the insides of waterways, but on the other hand, she also advised me on ways to narrow things down. Small girls lack transportation.'

'Transportation?'

'She wouldn't have driven a bike, let alone a car…chances are she's only got slim pickings, so taxis are out of the equation, and neither would she go on a train or a bus. In summary, she'd be somewhere within walking distance of her house.'

That might have been an overstatement.

This is an extension of that second hypothesis, that the front tooth was dropped on the second day – but it's true either way that a year five schoolgirl couldn't go very far on her own two feet.

'Why eliminate the possibility of a bicycle? Can primary schoolchildren not ride one on their own?'

'That part isn't definite, but she went missing whilst on her way back from school. If she came back home to grab her bike first, then that info would've been included in "the thing that stays in this

room”.’

Benikujaku-chan’s bike went missing with her too – that’s the sort of sentence that would’ve been there. Strictly speaking, she could’ve rode a bike to and from school too, but this isn’t middle school or high school; I’ve scarcely heard of any primary schools allowing students to come and go via bicycle.

‘Obviously, I’m not completely sure. Maybe Benikujaku-chan started riding on a bike she picked up from the street, or she could’ve hitch-hiked if she’s brave enough. But we’d be here forever if we listed every possibility, so it’s better if we started small.’

This is completely against the done thing when it comes to searching for people; normally one would look through a large area before narrowing it down, but since I don’t have an army of people with me, it’s the best I can manage.

By the looks of it, should we start with a radius of a few kilometres from the Beniguchi residence?

‘’Tis a good approximation of the extents of walking distance. But I do think if that small child wanted her parents to be more worried, she would have walked even further away…however, my master.’

Shinobu said – she may be completely uninterested in finding small girls, but she seems willing to help me with it.

Is that how she’s going to waste the rest of her days?

‘That small girl doth not only have her own home as a base, doth she? ’Tis a small radius, yea, but from what I have been hearing –

You haven’t been though.

‘Compared to her house, would her school not be the place her life revolveth?’

‘Ah, I see…it’s a blind spot for me. I didn’t go to primary school much, you see…’

‘Useless for thee in pretending to be a rebel.’

I was actually very serious back in primary school.

The habit of skipping class only began after my fall in high school.

‘So in addition to a circle around the Beniguchi residence, we’d need another circle around the primary school…no, that’s not right.’

If we involve the school, things would get complicated really quickly.

Shinobu may have used that past episode of ‘looking for a cat’ as a jab against me, but while we were talking about where she would be, the idea of ‘hiding in a friend’s house’ did crop up.

On second thought, that’d be difficult to see happening.

If not outright impossible.

For another family to receive a child, even in the name of protection, would still count as imprisonment…though the reason I’m sure Oikura would receive her all the same was because she managed to do the exact thing herself with the Araragi household.

The only reason why it worked was because both my parents were policemen…you could also say it was still permissible back then.

If I did the same thing right now, it’d probably cause such a big problem that my parents would get fired…I normally dislike phrases such as ‘isn’t the past great’, but it is true that as people became smarter and as life became easy, human society gradually lost its capacity for generosity.

Then again, the same generosity also meant turning a blind eye to domestic violence or abuse…

‘But even if she isn’t hiding, if she goes to her friends’ house often, then we’d have to consider how familiar she is to her friends’ houses’ neighbourhoods, or parks where she and her classmates gather and play…tsk, I’ve never played with friends back in primary school, so I’m completely blind-sided by that.’

‘That doth make thee sound like a true rebel.’

‘I spent most of my time playing with my sisters’ friends.’

‘Actest thou so all along?’

Never expected you to take a jab at that…then again, even these days the people I meet the most isn’t my lover at university, or my friends, or my childhood playmate, it’s the friend of my junior in my alma mater.

That’s no good, I’ll have to play with Meniko more.

Go to Sodachi’s lodgings more often.

As for Hitagi-san, I’ll see her in the epilogue anyway…

‘My circle of friends aside, so if we determine Benikujaku’s feasible walking distance with the addition of her friends’, then that means widening the search radius – that’d mean the entire school district, right?’

‘Something like that.’

Assuming she’s in a state school, then I could find out where it is in an instant with my smartphone – then I’d have to find the school district…I don’t need Ononoki-chan for that, I can find it out myself (with my smartphone, that is), and it’s safe to assume that the Beniguchis’ house would also be within it.

Yet, even with that narrowing down, the area is still much larger than I imagined…could I really finish it in one night?

It could be difficult.

Should I make a U-turn and grab my car…? No, it’d be even harder to search for a girl with the window down. Remember the first half of the advice – small girls could go where cars (or adults, even) can’t.

‘Well, I’d just have to comb through the area as best I can…take it as a challenge. Moving on, rather than head to the Beniguchis, let’s

head to the primary school first. It'd be embarrassing if we run into Ononoki-chan in the Beniguchis' house.'

'The same embarrassment one goeth through after bidding goodbye only to walk into the same lift together.'

A very specific example, that.

Ever after getting out of the car, Shinobu's still toying with my smartphone…shame, really. When it comes to technological innovations, this young girl's even more flexible than me.

012

But maybe Benikujaku-chan didn't set her primary school as a base? I walked around the primary school as I held onto this slim chance – the primary school that is Municipal Primary School No. 4. At a glance, one wonders exactly what this school is fourth in; unlike its name, which completely lacks any human flair or care, the security of the campus is ridiculously tight.

It is virtually expected these days to see a security camera at the front door, but barbed wire atop the walls? Although I don't think it's actually the case, they're so intimidating that I could imagine high-voltage electricity being passed through them.

Agile as primary schoolkids are, I don't think even the bravest would want to scale the walls and take shelter here…well, that sort of deduction should've been limited by common sense, but I don't want to risk triggering the alarm at the beginning of the investigation.

I'd have no idea what to say to the guard rushing in – especially about the blonde, golden-eyed young girl sitting on my shoulder.

'Then stop having me sit on thy shoulder?'

'Could you see anything from up there?'

'The shoulder-sitting formeth not part of the search operation.'

Similarly, Ononoki-chan's investigation is hampered by unreliable witness testimony.

How did Oshino manage to do it? Back when he was staying in my town, he was collecting all sorts of odd stories…but I wonder how that old no-hoper managed to collect the type of stories that 'don't leave the room'.

'It is what it is. We'll just have to go round and round outwards like a spiral in the area around Municipal Primary School No. 4. It isn't a large area, though I'm sure Beniguchi-chan would like to be as far

away from home as possible.'

To keep it at bay.

If Ougi-chan, ever the mystery fan, was here, then she would've thought of something more efficient, but this is the most I could think of…if I manage to think of something better, I'll just improvise.

Huff. I don't know if I can finish this in a night…I was hoping to sort this out before dawn, though now I might need the entirety of tomorrow too, by the looks of it.

'That habit thou acquired in high school not going away?'

'It's a chronic disease. It's staying with me for the rest of my life.'

'If something is to stay with thee for the rest of thine existence, surely I would be enough? That tsundere woman is going to separate from thee whilst thou art at university either way.'

'Hey, stop your bad-mouthing. Though it is true that she's been studying really hard. She seems to have found something she would like to do.'

'Completely unlike my master, who is utterly lost.'

'I'm not lost. Stop trying to make it sound like I have to find myself before I find the small girl.'

'Thy words, not mine…incidentally, my master. Not that I mind thy straightforward ways of thought, but as thy slave, if thou intend to use that method of looping in a spiral, wouldst thee find my powers of use?'

'Mm? Your powers? What, is this something to do with your femur?'

'Thee taking delightful interest in young girls' skeletons is one seriously terrifying trait. What unspeakable darkness lay in thine heart?'

A darkness as dark as Ougi-chan.

Come to think of it, it really is terrifying.

‘Now thou hast mentioned that the mystery maniac may offer a method more effective, wouldst thou mayhap lend time for me orating mine ideas?’

‘Orate?’

‘’Tis true thy current physique standeth no chance against that doll girl’s “Unlimited Rulebook”. However, ignoring that reckless and unsafe method of rapid transit suited for corpses, if thy objective is to survey the area from above, there should remain still a way.’

That wouldn’t just be an overview, that’s a full bird’s-eye view.

But all Ononoki-chan can do is a high-speed pass…even with all sorts of minor adjustments; not that Ononoki-chan’s here with us anyway.

‘I too can soar the skies. Hast thou forgotten?’

Ah.

That’s right, Shinobu, the former vampire, can grow bat-like wings – unlike Ononoki-chan’s rough and tumbling rocketry, vampires can fly like a winged dragon.

Come to think of it, that’s how the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade came to this country.

Twice, even.

Across the oceans.

She once even made a giant leap from the Antarctic with a super jump instant air dash – too much as far as migrants go, in both senses of the word.

‘I see. You thought of it when I mentioned you could see things

better from up there. Seriously, good luck always comes when you least expect it. Wish you could see things from my shoulder.'

'No, I have been on thy shoulder always.'

'So I see, it's not the femur, but the scapula.'

'My wings do not involve any transformation of the scapula. Thy musings are heading towards an unhealthy direction.'

In reality, it's probably transforming skin and muscles around the back…then it's less like a winged dragon or birds in general, and more like the wings of an insect.

Though if I mentioned anything about back muscles or insects, Shinobu would probably be angry, so I'll stick to bat wings.

'In addition, do not expect much – as thou knowest, I have lost most of my powers. I can fly no higher or speedier than the doll girl. Expect something more akin to a glider. It is by no means an ideal tool for transportation – but it seemeth to suit thy current needs best.'

Indeed it does.

High-speed, high-altitude flight carries with it a risk of death, but for a stable flight, well, as long as I make peace with it and treat it like a reverse bungee jump, I'll have more confidence in making it work.

In making it get off the ground.

If I'm viewing the surroundings from above, then that eliminates anything the map doesn't show; even if Benikujaku-chan is an expert at hiding, surely she wouldn't expect anyone looking for her from above?

If this was a mystery story, then to borrow a vampire's skill would be considered an unfair development, though this is all for the small girl's safety, so surely it's acceptable to skirt the rules here…I thought to myself.

It may be unfair, but it's not causing anybody harm.

Speaking of skirting the rules, just like Shinobu's bat wings, my eyesight is also coming into play here…an eyesight upgrade is an after-effect from my previous exploits, though now it seems I can use it beyond navigating mountain roads in the dark.

Normally, even for an area as small as a school district, there could be many places one misses in such a short amount of time, but I'm sure if I max out my vision, then I could cover a considerable area.

If I was still my high school self, I'd say something such as 'Right! In order to power up my vision, plus extending those bat wings so they can fly as long as possible – Shinobu, suck my blood! I don't care if it'll break the usual blood-giving (blood-sucking) schedule, just do it!'

But I've learnt from that. I can't throw away my life just for the sake of saving others…basically.

Have I learnt from that?

Anyway, if such a thing happened, that expressionless watcher would quite likely kill me, so Shinobu and I'll have to move ahead in our current condition.

'Then let us change our formation. I shall initiate the super jump instant air dash whilst thou sittest on my shoulder, then I shall hug thee all the way up to the skies. The most I can fly for would be a minute. I shall fly in a spiral within the area, round and round as skylarks do, so let us do our best.'

'Thank you so much. For letting me have the chance to sit on a young girl's shoulder.'

'Be grateful, but not for that.'

Like a skylark, huh.

Then again, peafowls aren't a bird known for soaring – at least, you won't see them high up in the sky.

Splendid as their feathers are, they’re all just for show.

013

As one who's always narrating all the bildungsromane, I am of course obligated to clarify that only peacocks have all the eye-catching feathers, but even though Benikujaku-chan's a girl, there's a part of me that still wishes she'd grow up to be as equally attractive.

But, from a few hundred metres above (I think; by the way, Ononoki-chan could easily fly up to the stratosphere – if she put her mind to it, she could probably reach outer space, so horrifying is her rocket launch), all I can see is how peaceful the town is.

From a bird's-eye view, or should I say, a monster's-eye view, the town itself quietly welcomed the night – almost all the lights from the houses were off, and all that's left were the street lamps.

Not a single person in sight.

There is of course the risk of being seen from down below, so I'm glad nobody's down there as I was hugged onto by a young girl flying in the skies, but when I say 'not a single person', that includes the small girl I'm looking for, so this isn't going very well.

Well, I say that, if that year five girl who's left home and freed herself from anything is having a banquet in the middle of the road or in a park, then my job here would be done, but that'd mean there's another problem, and I'm not lucky enough to have things end this neatly, so I guess I can't help it.

Even though it's all a rough approximation, knowing the layout around the school district is already plenty of progress…all that's left is for me, someone who doesn't have a photographic memory, to see how long I can stay up in the air.

I'm great at forgetting things.

Shinobu skilfully controlled her bat wings and gently landed on a road just outside the school district – she may have a superb skeleton, but it seems those thin, flexible wings also show potential,

I thought to myself.

‘Arigatō, Shinobu. This will serve as a great reference; alright, but this is where we really begin looking for a small girl. Let’s take a walk around town and go around in circles.’

‘Akin to a snail’s shell, I see.’

Shinobu said after retracting her wings.

She looks quite tired…not only is she no longer as powerful, she also had to carry a human with her; I can appreciate it’s not easy at all.

Thanks for all your hard work.

‘A lost cow, a snail, huh. If it were me, I would have turned it into escargot a long time ago.’

‘If you’re tired, why not return into my shadow?’

Surely it’s more comfy than riding on my shoulder – besides, if somebody does show up, having a blonde, gold-eyed girl would not make a good first impression.

‘Let us proceed.’

It seems I’ve asked a lot of Shinobu tonight; it’s not often she’d actually do as I tell her and return inside my shadow.

I feel sorry for her.

Whilst I cannot break the usual blood-giving (blood-sucking) schedule, I think I should give her some special doughnuts as a reward tomorrow – I wonder what promotional events are going on?

Having no partner for conversation makes me particularly lonely (standing in the middle of an unfamiliar town in the middle of the night gives anybody that feeling), but some things one cannot go ahead and do until one is truly alone – and I’m not talking about the weird stuff.

Even without a young girl in tow, as far as these peaceful quarters are concerned, a loitering university student makes for quite a creepy story – naturally, I don't want to be stopped and questioned, and nor do I want to scare the people living around here.

I'm serious, sighting rumours like these are how tales of oddities get spun – some rehashing an old legend, some completely new inventions.

An oddity on the prowl for small girls night after night.

How frightening.

Up until now, I've went out at night thinking only 'well, it'll all be fine' and not give it any second thought, since I was only in high school.

With that in mind, I must keep up a wholesome disguise whilst searching for the small girl, and that means some compromises – namely, I have to give up a detailed combing-through.

To let out walking as an option.

And run.

Which is to say, pretend that I'm jogging – running along a track, a spiralling track.

If we're talking about wholesome disguises, nothing beats jogging. One exception being my junior who does two sets of ten-kilometre jogs daily; she's a wholly unwholesome pervert – no, to give that sicko credit, jogging is perhaps the only thing keeping her from being shunned by everyone around her.

Fortunately, I'm currently wearing sneakers, half-length trousers, and a parka. It's no proper sportswear, but it is an adequately sporty look.

Although to be honest, it also looks halfway between sportswear and pyjamas…even though I'm meeting a god I'm on good terms with, it's still a bit disrespectful, but now it has come into good use.

The reason why I'm confident in my physique is because I've been strengthened by being a vampire before – this is another instance of skirting the rules, but between doing this and getting arrested for doing things properly, I'd rather jog to my heart's content.

I can't do that if Shinobu isn't in my shadow…that one-piece dress of hers wouldn't suit a middle-of-the-night jogging very well.

That lightweight garment is going to flap around.

There is another advantage to this plan – this may sound obvious, but running saves plenty of time compared to jogging.

But a disadvantage within the advantage would be a higher risk of missing something important, though my vampire after-effect that is my improved vision would be enough to compensate.

So come on a journey.

I did a few stretches to warm myself up (I plan on relying on my vampiric powers, so this is more aimed at my psyche, which is quite important), and then I started running – I never thought this would be what I look like the first time I jogged, but I guess these experiences just accumulate as one gets older.

Please ignore the inherent contradiction in tracing a spiral, inspired by a slow snail's shell, by means of rapidly running 'round.

014

It's been two hours.

I've run around the town once – though for whatever reason, I feel like I've already run around town ten times (it's an inwards spiral where each loop was shorter than the last); should I join the athletics team? I thought as I looked at the impressive time I set (but of course, that'd be stepping beyond unfair), but in the end, no dice.

I couldn't even call it progress.

I wanted to say that knowing Benikujaku-chan isn't in the school district alone would make the sweat I shed worth it, but that also means I have no other available recourse.

According to Hachikuji's advice, I even looked for what I thought were the spots nobody would normally think of…though all that ended up in was a jogging course with a 'what do I do if I really found a cat' kind of feeling.

Since she's not in the school district, that means the search area has extended indefinitely…much as I don't want to admit it, I might be out of my depth with this one.

It's completely out of my reach.

'But that face doesn't look like the face of a man who's about to give up, Mister Vampy.'

Having set the finish of the jogging course to be the Beniguchi residence, I met with Ononoki-chan – or should I say, she was the one who met me there, with a high five.

She said what she said with the same expressionlessness.

Not the face of a man who's about to give up, huh?

'Where's the young girl seductress? Sleeping on your shadow? She's

always like this. Taking a rest whilst others around her are doing all the hard work.'

'Shinobu tried her hardest too – and you, Ononoki-chan? Finished searching the house?'

'Why else would I be here if I'm not done? I know Mister Vampy's headed to this house in a spiral.'

She really knows everything about where I am.

I can't afford to do anything suspect.

'Although to buy filthy magazines knowing that a tween girl's watching presents an unmatchable thrill.'

'Mister Vampy's the unmatchable one. Don't even think of buying gravure MILF mags under a tween girl's watch. I'm getting put off.'

'In all seriousness, now that I'm past eighteen and at uni, the fact that I can buy those legally does make life slightly less fun. I guess it's something I've lost. I have you, Ononoki-chan, to thank for in injecting some of that excitement back.'

'Don't say it as though we're rival creatives. I'm keeping an eye on you, and you're being kept an eye on. Looks like surveillance, observation, and penalties aren't enough. Incarceration would be for the best.'

So there's an oddity prison?

'So, how's things? I have to say I'm quite looking forward to this.'

I misspoke with 'looking forward'…as far as finding out what's going on with the Beniguchis is concerned, unlike my jogging, the ideal scenario is to find nothing untoward at all.

If this story ends with 'not all rumours are true', then wouldn't that be great…however, Ononoki-chan didn't look happy at all.

Well, she's expressionless by default, so nothing's really changed, but;

‘It doesn’t look good.’

This answer is enough to tell how she feels – if corpses can feel, that is.

‘I am a specialist, a professional, so I’m in my natural habitat when it comes to investigations and support. I say that, but I’m a professional in oddity-related phenomena – so I went about it as I usually would, but I feel like I’m forced in seeing something I hate to see.’

‘Something you hate to see?’

‘At the very least, I couldn’t say what I saw was good. You owe me big time for this one, Mister Vampy.’

She says it doesn’t look good, but it doesn’t look like she wants to say what it is either…what abject horror am I going to see inside the Beniguchis…

The kind of reaction reminds me of that.

When I sneaked into the Hanekawa residence myself without anyone asking me to, when I gave myself a shock, when I came out dismayed, disorganised, discombobulated, and then, when I dashed away from it all.

‘But then, I am aware that every family has their own troubles. Don’t make that concerned face, I’ll go into it in detail…on our way back. Let’s go back. I don’t want to be here longer than I have to.’

‘Oh, uh…’

Between the exhaustion from feeling I’ve run a full marathon, and the futility from not being able to find anything, I really want to have a break, but she’s right, it’d be better if we stayed within the vicinity of the Beniguchis for as short as possible.

This house –

As far as I can see, it’s a moderately lavish and large house. If something’s happening inside, our lurking presence would be an

unwelcome one.

As a health-conscious jogger, that means I'll have to run somewhere else…I say that, I went to the front door to check the nameplate.

Just as Ononoki-chan said, in addition to the full names of both parents, there's also the names of their two daughters – Beniguchi Hibari and Beniguchi Kujaku.

Atop Hibari's name, a straight line crossing it out.

…Harsh, really. No need to cross her name out, is there?

'One day, Beniguchi-chan's name too will be crossed out', I thought for a moment, before banishing that impropriety out from my brain.

'Right then, Ononoki-chan. Open up your legs and let me crawl underneath.'

'Why would you want to be humiliated like Han Xin did? We've been serious up until now. Has your brain gone haywire? No, don't answer that, your head's always been wired up wrong. Has all that running loosened up some more wires?'

An overly long retort, that.

She may not show it, but something really is bugging her. I'm worried.

Although she might say something along the lines of 'I'm more worried about you'.

'No, by that I meant get behind me, and just the head will do. I wanted you to get on my shoulder. You said you wanted to get going…'

'I'm fine with you only doing that with the vampire seductress. That's not a proper follow up, Mister Vampy. I myself am a transportational tool; I'm not to be transported', Ononoki-chan replied.

'I see. I'll sit on your shoulder then…just like Shinobu carried me

just now.'

'Wait, what even happened while I was gone? Do you want me to "Unlimited Rulebook" your ass to Mars?'

You can do that?

I think that'd see a tale of the supernatural cross over into sci-fi territory…

'As interested as I am in space operas, no thanks. Then let's move, on our own separate pairs of feet.'

'I want us to go our separate ways. A dismissal. Where are we heading?'

'To the parkade. I've parked my car there. They charge by the hour, so I want to drive out of there quick as I can.'

'Stingy-ass…'

'It's not stingy, it's called thrift. I'm making sure I use the pocket change my parents gave me in a financially sustainable and responsible manner. Try standing in a uni student's shoes.'

'Not standing in anybody's shoes. Just get a part-time job, for Pete's sake.'

'Hwhy's e'rry'un tellin' me to git a job?'

'Because you should? What's with that accent anyway? I should get big sis to deal with you instead.'

Weren'tchye talkin' to me in that same tone, Ononoki-han?

Kids these days…

'If you really want a job, I'm sure Gaen-san would be more than willing to recommend you a few. Just like that "mummy incident" that just went.'

'If I work under her, I feel like I'll never have it easy…'

‘Stop trying to have it easy. Be glad you’re even employed.’

Really tough, this ‘working’ business.

And besides, in any case, a promise has been made after the ‘mummy incident’ whereby Gaen-san won’t ever see me as long as I’m at uni – to never involve me in anything troublesome.

To not see her again is, for me, a lonely prospect, and I feel quite complicated about it; if you look at it differently, it also means she won’t save me when I’m in danger…but if I went and asked her for help, I feel it would be something that fits the expectations of that big sis who knows everything.

Either way, this case we’re facing isn’t severe enough to need Gaen-san’s advice.

That person, like Ononoki-chan, is a specialist in oddities, and not a specialist in humans, let alone a specialist in small girls.

But Ononoki-chan gave what sounded like an ominous prediction as she began walking:

‘By the way, if you ask me whether Gaen-san would keep that promise, I’d say she won’t.’

For now at least, it seems she already knows the way to the parkade and doesn’t need my help.

Which does make sense, since even though we went at different speeds, Ononoki-chan flew to this town, so like us, she’d already have a full view from up above.

‘……’

‘Mm? What’s the matter, Mister Vampy? You’ve stopped all of a sudden. I know, I know, since you insist, I’ll have you crawl between my legs. Give me a moment as I lift up my skirt.’

‘That’s not it. There’s one thing I forgot.’

‘Your common sense? Your conscience? Your moral compass?’

‘A search spot.’

015

I've checked all the places according to Hachikuji's advice, even the places I'd normally never think of, but there's one place I'd forgotten to check which is the very beginning – the parkade.

How unusual of me, you could say, or you could also say it's very like me to make such a mistake.

Whichever way you choose, the fact is I left the parkade as soon as I parked my New Beetle, so I couldn't say I'm sure I checked everywhere around the twenty-four-hour multi-storey car park – I've always had in my head that I've started from Municipal Primary School No. 4, but once I think about it, that parkade should be where the search had begun.

I've never managed to put 'year five child' and 'motor vehicle' together…to have missed this, even when Hachikuji specifically warned me about things like that, rather misses the point of her giving out advice in the first place.

And on top of that, to set the parkade as 'somewhere that's already been checked' whilst I was jogging, I'm hopeless…I may brag about being prepared, but as it turns out, there's still one place I failed to account for.

It would then seem that in addition to this parkade, there were many other points that I missed – I guess even with a few cheats on, someone new in town will still mess things up.

'But isn't this a great lead? A car park is a great place to hide in. There's loads of blind spots, and it's perfectly suited for kids to play hide and seek in.'

'I wouldn't say it's perfectly suited –'

The sheer amount of blind spots also mean it's a disaster magnet if a child does hide around – yes, it is a rare occasion for me to suddenly think of a new location to look for before leaving town, but it's a place where I don't want to find anything. Call it my

instinct.

I don't want to see anybody hiding in there.

But, it is ultimately true that its distance from the Beniguchi residence and the school make it an ideal hiding spot.

The parkade.

More specifically, a multi-storey car park with two storeys and one basement floor, without any staff – presumably it's used mainly by the people who live around here.

I'm pretty sure the Beniguchis don't park here though…but on the other hand, I don't see a garage at their house whilst I was there.

'They do have a garage. There's even a car parked inside – it just looks like scrap though.'

'Scrap?'

'Looks like it's never been driven in years, or even maintained, for that matter…I couldn't imagine it passing inspection in that state.'

Ononoki-chan said as she walked straight ahead.

Given that she knows where the car park is, she could've easily left me behind (with her 'Unlimited Rulebook'), but she doesn't seem to be planning on doing that – it seems she's letting me take the lead.

Right now I have the urge to start running to the car park, but I can tell if I started doing that, I'd stall and sputter quite awkwardly…if I did run, I'd probably be out of breath by the time I reached the car park.

Eh, before I actually get there and act on it, now that I'm calm and cool, I could readjust my condition and listen to what Ononoki-chan has to say.

We're now far away from the Beniguchi residence after all.

'So I guess you could say the dismal car's a sign of things to come.

Once I got into the house, I started to wonder if there's even anybody living inside it – er, how do I put this…'

'Could you mean it's like a hoarder's house?'

As far as hoarding goes, there's one example I can think of from experience, and that's Kanbaru Suruga's room – if that sort of mess stretches to fill an entire house, then it would've been an unbearably sorry sight.

The kitchen would be unimaginable.

Then again, if the parents treated their children with neglect, then the same mindset of 'abandonment' could apply to their possessions, so I guess it's at least consistent…?

'But', Ononoki-chan said, 'it doesn't look like a hoarder's house. It looks empty. Uncomfortably empty.'

'Empt –'

'Not in the sense of a newly-inhabited house. I guess "abandoned" is the right way to put it. It's like the house was built, and then it's just sat there – you see what I'm getting at?'

If you ask me if I get it, I'd answer no…I've never heard or seen anything as peculiar as that before.

A new old house.

They say if a house doesn't get lived in, then it gets hurt…but then, for the Beniguchis, where do that family of four spend their lives in?

'Maybe they don't live there at all. Maybe they devote their lives to some other place – I don't mean this is their second house, but as in they spend the bulk of their lives at work or in school.'

'……'

Could that random baseline guess of Benikujaku-chan spending most of her time at school be accidentally true?

No, not only true, I think it might be on the dot.

Not that it makes me happy.

‘I say it’s empty, but it’s not completely devoid of objects. But let me ask you something, Mister Vampy. Do you get it when I say *everything feels cluttered despite having barely anything*?’

I wonder what unbelievable sight she just saw as Ononoki-chan put that question to me in her flat voice…she may sound as expressionless as ever, but I can hear her seething from her heart.

Everything feels cluttered despite having barely anything…

Definitely out of the ordinary, I’d say.

Kanbaru’s room is unkempt because it’s chock full of stuff, but if you ask me to imagine the opposite, then frankly, I can’t.

I’d probably have another panic attack if I actually saw the house’s interior with my own two eyes…

‘Mm. So, Ononoki-chan, does that mean the parents aren’t there? Or that you didn’t see them?’

‘They’re fast asleep. In the bedroom. Is it a bedroom, that? It’s empty save for a couple of easily-transportable thin mattresses. And the father and mother don’t share a room.’

A piece of intelligence that sent chills down my spine – even though this wasn’t some supernatural tale at all.

Sleeping in separate rooms – I think that’s called living separate lives under the same roof? No, it’s not a must for wed couples to sleep in the same room; that’d be too premature a judgement…but there’s a bigger elephant in the room.

Even though their daughter is probably kidnapped, or at least definitely missing, they’re still sleeping soundly; they didn’t even realise they had an intruder. That’d be the bigger problem in what they’re doing – or what they’re not doing.

Since they're fast asleep.

'……'

'Speaking of blind spots, there aren't any in the house. I thought sneaking in would be the difficult bit, but that wasn't the case at all – the reason why I say there aren't any blind spots is because there isn't much to see in the first place. But since I couldn't find the things we wanted to find, I wouldn't say I've made any progress. Yet at the same time, I'd imagine what I've relayed to you was plenty helpful, right?'

It was plenty helpful indeed.
Plendifermaxigargantuapocalypticalifragilisticexpialidociously helpful.

That explains why she high-fived me when I ended my jog – there's a reason why the investigation was done so quickly.

On that, there is a strong possibility that the front tooth was placed in the postbox on the very first day she went missing…with that family leading *that* kind of life, they probably don't check their own postbox daily.

If they discovered it on the second day, but it got thrown in on the first day…then there's little meaning in searching the parkade.

'…Let me just confirm something. Is it true that, in addition to the parents' rooms and the living room, both daughters' rooms are next to empty too?'

'Mm. But there are signs that both sisters shared the same room.'

So both daughters have a room they can call their own – and don't sleep on the corridor, for that matter.

Of course, this isn't consolation at all…though the chances that they shared the same room comes as a bit of salvation amongst all this mess.

The parents sleep in separate rooms.

The sisters spend their time in the same room.

Compared to what I heard from Higasa-chan, maybe the two sisters shared more amity than I thought.

‘That would make the older sister leaving the younger sister alone an even more pertinent lead – by the way, Mister Vampy. I might not have been able to find much on Transistor Slender, but I’ve got some pretty solid info about where the older sister, Hibari, ended up in.’

‘Eh? But I’d imagine we’d find out *less* about her. Since she moved out.’

‘When I say “info”, I meant leaving a mark. There’s some traces of paper that was once stuck on the wall.’

‘Paper stuck on a wall? You mean a poster?’

‘Not quite. Didn’t you remember, Miser Vampy? You were a university candidate up until spring. Didn’t you write one of those motivational sheets of paper that you then stuck on the wall? With “*Standard score 25 or bust!” written on it?’*

‘That’s a very low bar.’[13]

But now I see, that kind of paper.

Well, you could say it’s something like a talisman…I personally don’t have fond memories related to talismans, so I never made that kind of self-encouragement artefact, but it seems popular if you’re a candidate – a *candidate*?

‘So the sheet’s still there in the sisters’ room?’

‘The sheet itself’s gone, but she probably stuck it on before the ink dried, because I can still see what’s written on it. Hibari’s an impatient one, it seems.’

‘…But to stick that kind of thing on, then peel it off, doesn’t that mean Beniguchi Hibari was studying for uni? That means – ’

She wasn't employed, nor was she on an overseas trip; she would be studying right now, at university, right? Then again, she could've failed miserably, and tore up that sheet of paper in fury…

But, even if we know she's at university, we don't know which. I heard that Japan alone has over seven hundred universities – and of course there's a non-zero chance she decided to study abroad, so the possibilities are endless.

So I guess we have to ask Mitonon…this isn't something I want to do. I don't want her knowing that I'm acting on my own, nor do I want to involve her.

'The fact that her name is seemingly getting set to "Mitonon" aside, I don't think we need to do that, Mister Vampy. I don't know if she passed, but I do know what her first choice was.'

'How?'

'Here's what she wrote on the wall: *Manase University or bust!*'

016

As far as the five circles theory goes, Beniguchi Hibari should be ‘a friend of a friend of a friend’, but now that she’s actually a university classmate – I felt buzzed about the hand fate has dealt me.

It’s the kind of uneasiness that you find when a ghost story ends with ‘*it’s you!*’ – truth really is stranger than fiction.

One can say it’s not only out of the ordinary, it’s *odd*.

Then again, it’d be quite the tale if it was the same high school, but there are far more people at university, and I don’t know if she’s in the same department as mine, so I guess this kind of coincidence really isn’t that much of a surprise –

But, to boldly proclaim moving out, then to end up in nearby Manase University, of all places…she could easily move into the metropolises and make it big herself, but the distance between that town and Manase University is such that, if one wills it, it is easily within commuting distance.

Driving to school can be said to be a preference, and I want to move out at some point too, so maybe it’s not that strange a choice… could it be because she’s worried about her little sister?

Much as she wanted to move out, she doesn’t want to go too far – it could be she wanted to be able to return home quickly in case of an emergency, so she ended up picking MNU.

‘The sort of distance where the soup wouldn’t get too cold – well, with how derelict the family is, consider it lucky it hasn’t frozen. Look, we’re here, Mister Vampy.’

Ononoki-chan’s summary of her investigation left me surprised, as well as uncomfortable, as we reached the parkade.

The multi-storey car park.

I parked my car on the rooftop…although it's always better to pay less since they charge by the hour, I can't jump in and drive away just yet.

This is, for now, the last search location, so I have to do a thorough check…even if I come home empty-handed, at least I have the comfort of knowing that I tried.

So maybe I should start from the basement? I think the only reason why I thought that was because I had the word 'sneak' in my head one too many times…

'Since we've been on the same boat, I may as well help you with the search here too. I want something to do.'

She probably wanted to help in order to wipe away the shock in seeing what the Beniguchis were like…an admirable work attitude, that.

Compare that with me, someone who sneaked into the Hanekawa residence and came back home weeping and needing my younger sister to console me…thinking back on it, what a pathetic sight that was.

With no reason to refuse her, I went to the floor plan with Ononoki-chan, before going our own separate ways and commencing our search.

If the small girl flies out from nowhere, then what we're doing is akin to something hunters do – no, that's not right; as I've said before, that sort of phraseology would only get mistaken.

This isn't a big multi-storey car park, but there are a lot of cars parked around here, which makes for an abundance of blind spots… two storeys from the ground up, one storey beneath, plus the rooftop, how many cars does that make?

Assuming fifty cars a floor, that'd make it two hundred?

It may not be full because it's night time, but if we went through all the blind spots, car by car, then even with two of us, wouldn't it take until at least dawn to finish checking? No matter how speedy

Ononoki-chan is…

That's fine though. If we have to continue through the night until dawn, then we shall.

Regardless of whether we can find anything, it's the most we can do through the night – though speaking of which, the interior of the car park is mighty dark in the underground level, and even the lights flicker; truly an ideal situation for a game of hide and seek.

I'm honestly amazed at how I didn't think to search this place to begin with – you really can't see what's under your nose, or under the lamp, for that matter.

Of course.

I wouldn't say something regretful along the lines of 'I should've looked around here first'. It's not like I'd find Benikujaku-chan here anyway, and after that, even having had Shinobu do some hard work, I still would've had to run around the entire town.

I'd still probably end up doing the same things but in a different order – looking around the car park, flying around town, then running around town.

Like a snail.

No, by what I said above I didn't mean I failed to find anything in the parkade despite our efforts.

I did manage to find something.

But it was that something that made me think I'd do the same things again – flying, gliding, and running, *albeit in a different sense*.

It can be concluded that Benikujaku-chan was found in the emergency exit area on the first floor of the carpark – more accurately, we found *a part of* Benikujaku-chan and her belongings.[14]

On the landing between the first floor and the rooftop, there was a school backpack, a child's blouse, a skirt with suspenders on it,

underwear, socks, indoor shoes, and a bright tulip yellow hat. There was also something else:

Nineteen teeth scattered across the floor.

017

Yikes.

– Is the thought that entered my head only after I began touching – obviously, it's infinitely better than directly touching a small girl, but touching the belongings of a missing year five schoolgirl without wearing gloves is, whichever way you look at it, a big 'yikes'.

Let alone all those exposed teeth.

'Fingerprints…'

Too late for that now, are we?

I've already started picking them up.

For now, at least, hold in the urge to vomit; the last thing you want to do is to dirty the scene even further – make sure everything remains undisturbed. You *are* the son of police officers, aren't you?

You've been through countless baptisms by fire, haven't you?

You've fought a vampire, wrangled a cat.

A crab, a snail, a monkey, a snake, a bee, a swindler, a corpse, an *onmyōji*, an undying bird, a thrall, a puppeteer, a head of specialists – even a god or a darkness, you've faced them all before, haven't you?

Don't flinch, don't panic.

Show them what grown-up you is like.

'Although I guess it's fine if you panic, Mister Vampy – I don't feel so well myself.'

Ononoki-chan said, seemingly consoling more than myself – as she held me up after I slipped on the staircase, with a lone finger.

Having searched the multi-storey car park from bottom to top, I met with Ononoki-chan at my car up on the rooftop, before having a final look at the emergency staircase next to the lifts – starting from the basement floor, working all the way up, then walking down the stairs to the basement again.

That was the route we agreed on at the start, though frankly, at that time, I was about to give up – but right as I opened the creaking door and entered the emergency stairwell, I saw the landing.

'Without any cover, and yet a blind spot…if people parked on the first floor, then they wouldn't look, and even if people parked on the roof, they'd only use the stairs in an emergency.'

The key point being all of this was on *the landing between the first floor and the rooftop*…whoever did this may not have intended to hide it, but they certainly chose a blind spot.

And as far as I can see, there weren't any security cameras in the stairwell at all – it's a great hiding place.

It is however, not a great bed for a girl leaving home.

Could it be the kidnapper's hideout?

Not that any of that actually means anything, they're just my deductions, and, in the end, what I hope to be true – because even if they were in primary school, who loses all their milk teeth in one go?

There's nineteen of them.

Making twenty in total.

So the front tooth that made its way into the Beniguchis' postbox was only one of many that came out…were the rest going to be delivered one by one?

No, from what I can see, the kidnapper seems to have given up on that – how should I put this, this whole scene looks like the result of someone 'getting rid of things in a hurry'.

Getting rid of things…

Benikujaku-chan's belongings, clothings, and teeth.

They were likely forcibly taken out; everything in the backpack's scattered, and the clothes are all torn…what the hell happened here?

Yanking all the teeth out, what's the meaning behind that? It doesn't look as if it's to threaten the parents…or could it be an afterthought?

Could ripping out all the milk teeth be some kind of dental work?

'I can't believe this. I was only expecting to find a little girl leaving home, yet I've found proof that this was a kidnapping after all… what the hell am I doing?'

Calm down.

It is true to say I feel like I'm forced to witness the sum total of human despair, but I still have a sliver of hope – in the scattered belongings, and the nineteen teeth.

For those with a photographic memory, they'd probably live to never forget this image in front of them, but I am yet to see a girl's dead body – whilst this is the least hopeful of consolations, it is true that that little girl can still be alive.

She can still be saved. Still can.

'But this is as far as you'll go, isn't it?'

Ononoki-chan said to me as I grit my teeth (the teeth I still have), in her flat voice.

Whilst still holding me up with one finger.

'That face is the face of someone who still hasn't given up – but remember that promise you made? If the thing that "stays in this room" does turn out to be a kidnapping, you said you'll "③: then leave it to the police and make a clean exit". You remember that,

don’t you? So you’ll call them and end this. Right?’

‘But, Ononoki-chan –’

‘Right?’

I – I don’t know what to say.

018

‘And? What’s going on, Koyomi? If you’re okay with it, go ahead. I’m all ears.’

‘Bloody hell! You’re early this time!’

The following day, inside the cafeteria of Manase National University.

I’m having lunch with Senjougahara Hitagi, my lover since high school – I originally wanted to meet up with Meniko, but I couldn’t find her; right as I was about to have lunch alone, I received a call from Hitagi-san.

‘I’ve said this before, you are not allowed to place Meniko-san higher on your list of people to meet than me. How damn desperate are you in hunting for new friends, man? The fact that you’ve been going to Sodachi-san’s lodgings all the time doesn’t make me happy, not one bit. Haven’t you even been playing with Kanbaru’s former teammate lately?’

Hitagi-san said, her expression nonplussed.

Erm.

So it looks like Kanbaru told her.

Chances are she probably also told her about the meeting I had with Higasa-chan alone, in my house, about tidying up the Girls’ Basketball Club.

I see, so that’s why she asked me to meet up with her.

She looks genuinely angered, so I have nothing to say back to her… it’d probably for the best if I didn’t tell her I played with Hachikuji and Ononoki-chan after that too.

Not only because it’d only lead to a misunderstanding, but because my lips are sealed…by the missing persons bureau.

I thought it'd kick up a monumental fuss like kicking a hornet's nest, but as I called the police with Ononoki-chan pestering me to, the world around me remained silently indifferent.

'Monumental fuss', not even the newspapers or the TV news channels picked up on it either…I guess they really can't report on it yet, just like the first thing I thought of when I heard what Higasa-chan had to say.

In any case, with only a few personal belongings and a few body parts – in the end, without a body, the person would still count as missing, so for the media, to make a monumental fuss out of it would probably not be a good idea.

This is something I agree on.

In the case where Benikujaku-chan was actually alive…if she hasn't been harmed yet, giving the heinous criminal coverage, and in turn, excitement, is something I do not stand for.

With that much evidence, it'd likely take little time for the kidnapper to be caught…and then there's also the issue that we're racing against the clock, racing to save a small girl from her death.

The reason why information about this has been relatively locked down was, dare I say, all thanks to the first witness being me – more correctly, thanks to me being the son of two officers, who also happen to be part of the force's senior leadership.

This I have to admit, much as I don't want to…otherwise it wouldn't be strange if I was treated as the perpetrator, given the situation.

Things wouldn't be locked down, I'd be locked up.

I did, after all, disturb the scene, left my fingerprints, and fundamentally, found a girl's traces in an emergency stairwell in a multi-storey car park in the next town over from where I live – I originally wanted to give an anonymous tip, but I'm quite sure I'd be in a stuck in a quagmire if I did.

In a worst-case scenario, I'd even get Hachikuji, Ononoki-chan, and

Shinobu into trouble – how am I ever going to explain all this to them?

The little girl, the tween girl, the young girl, none of them human either.

'I'll explain this to Gaen-san, so it'd be better if Mister Vampy doesn't report to the police anonymously.'

So Ononoki-chan said, and maybe it was thanks to Gaen-san that I managed to come out of this unscathed…that four-year-long promise has already gone with the wind, it seems.

It's all terribly shameful for me.

To use my parents' clout, to have Gaen-san's help, isn't that no different from me in high school?

No, that wasn't even my rebellious high school streak, I've regressed all the way to my frivolous, 'defender of justice' middle school self. At a time when even the Fire Sisters of the Tsuganoki Second Middle School have been dissolved.

I really want to feel like I've grown up.

Anyway, the local police didn't put particular blame on me disturbing the evidence or being outside at night; all they did was ask me how the scene was when I found it, and for my contact details, and then they let me go – pretending to be a uni student who has an early morning class the next day is still permissible, right?

…Though I've been thinking about this since the 'mummy incident', does Gaen-san have connections even in the police force? Although this kidnapping has little to do with oddities, she seemed to wield a large influence still…she couldn't be this well-prepared just to help me out, could she?

I only hope she doesn't have any other wacky ideas up her sleeve…

'Sorry, Hitagi. I don't think now's the time just yet. People's lives are at stake here.'

‘Oh? Hm. Is it the usual? Something to do with that blonde loli slave of yours?’

‘Not even your loli slave jokes could get a laugh out of me this time.’

‘Must be dead serious if you couldn’t muster laughing at “loli slave”. Seems I really showed up too early. This isn’t like me at all. Have I been too eager?’

The moment Hitagi finished that, she stood up without a change in expression – to recognise the danger of the situation, and to not pursue this further, I’m really impressed.

I guess that’s what happens when you’re tightly wound against everybody for two full years in high school…although these days she’s more your vivacious university student, singing in delight the joys of youth.

‘If you’ll excuse me then, I’ve got a lecture to go to. It’s quite a long walk to the Classical Finances lecture hall. I’ll leave you to your meal. You can tell me everything after it’s done. Just remember to be careful.’

With that, Hitagi gave a V sign with her right hand, pointing at her eyes, then at mine — ‘I’m watching you’, she’s saying.

Been watching foreign TV dramas much?

First off, I’m already being watched.

‘Mm…you’re saying “be careful”, but it’s not like I’ll be putting myself in danger.’

‘But’, Hitagi said, ‘you wouldn’t do nothing at this stage, right? Since you’re Araragi Koyomi.’

019

‘Please excuse me, is this seat taken, please?’

Seconds after Hitagi left the cafeteria, with almost impeccable timing, as if they’ve been watching the whole time, someone asked to share a table with me.

‘Have they been waiting this whole time for an empty seat?’ I originally thought, but that wasn’t it…the cafeteria may be busy during lunch break, but there’re still a few seats available.

It’s a girl in a recruit suit.[15]

Or is it not a girl?

She…looks older than me, and the fact that she’s dressed like a jobseeker tells me she’s probably in her final year…although it also looks more like the suit was wearing the person, so maybe her penultimate year?

Regardless if she’s in her third or fourth year, she’s an adult either way, so saying ‘girl’ was rude of me.

Though hasn’t it become a trend these days?

Anyway, since Hitagi exited the cafeteria like a stage actress who missed her cue, all I can answer with was a –

‘It’s free.’

‘Thank you very much, thank you.’

The woman in the recruit suit nodded and sat.

To sit after me giving her permission; seems like she’s in full interviewee mode.

My senpai, huh…having changed jobs from the most senior year to the most junior, I’m still new to dealing with my senpais in university.

What's going on, recruiting new society members? I thought that period had long gone…or is she looking for a successor, now that she found work?

What did she see in *me*? Right as I was in the middle of this confusion, a waiter approached us for our orders. The woman in the recruit suit answered, 'A coffee, please. Black, please.'

'Nice to meet you. Please, my name is Beniguchi Hibari.'

She then gave her name.

Beniguchi Hibari?

I think I've heard that somewhere before – isn't what I'm thinking at all.

It's a name I've heard only yesterday, and more than that, it's a name I've seen yesterday, albeit crossed off with a line.

'Beniguchi…-san?'

'Ah, please, there is no need to be polite with honorifics. Please, we are in the same year.'

She said – yes, that's it.

My junior's (Higasa-chan's) teammate's (Shounou Mitono's) senpai in middle school, that is, Beniguchi Hibari, should be in the same year as me – so a senpai of mine she isn't. Neither is she in her third or fourth year; she's no adult either.

But why the recruit suit?

'Sorry, that would be because the companies have started recruiting for new recruits.'

She answered.

For real…? I haven't even rid myself of a high schooler mindset. I guess this is what people mean by being 'highly adroit'.

So that's the difference between someone working hard to make ends meet, and someone complacently living in their parents' house.

Come to think of it, I remember hearing about recruitment seminars or classes on interviews…I heard it from the one who sat in front of me just now, Senjougahara Hitagi.

Since now's the best time to mention it, the girls' dorms that Hitagi's staying in are full of people like that – students living there are studying for their future, a bit like a private school of their own.

It's a place where students go to university at day and live there at night – intermingling with every kind of student from every subject for four full years, a place where people develop and refine what they have.

Ahh, I see.

Ononoki-chan did say this – that Manase University was the first choice of Benikujaku-chan's older sister…

Great to see she's made it.

'Do please excuse me, your name is Araragi Koyomi-san, is it?'

For her to tell me to drop the honorific, she's awfully polite herself – feels inconsistent, if anything.

Or should I say, she's probably too eager to 'please'.[16]

Is there even a need to be this deferential in an interview? Even before thinking about 'how do you know my name', this seems a more burning question to ask Hibari-san – or more specifically, Benihibari's [紅雲雀, lit. 'red skylark'] attitude.

Mmm?

'Ah, I have heard about you from Shounou Mitono-san, if you'll excuse me.'

Benihibari answered the question I didn't even had on my mind –

about how she knew my name.

So I see.

A reverse engineering of the five circles.

But hang on, this only explains how she got my name, it doesn't explain why she's here with me.

She's the one whose younger sister got kidnapped – to be honest, I originally had in mind someone who looked on top of things, but she looks restless and insecure.

Having thought that, it does make its own sense…because if she got wind of me witnessing that scene on the landing…

If it was confirmed to be a kidnapping, then the police would've already been mobilised – for an older sister who's worried for her little sister after she left her alone, it'd be impossible to stay calm.

Ah, so she found me because she wanted more details about the case? Then how did she know I was the first one to witness it?

So even with an injunction, if there's a place that leaks information, the leak's still going to happen…frankly, with that brutal a scene, in front of a victim's anxious relative, it's too overbearing a task for me to walk them through; but with things having come to this, it's an 'interrogation' I have to accept.

Or so I thought, but my hacky detective deduction has struck empty once again – no, it skirted the edge, but it got nowhere near the heart of the matter.

'I am going to be straightforward with this, please, if you will excuse me, Araragi-san. Can you please help me, please? I am now suspected to have kidnapped my own younger sister.'

Benihibari said, her eyes shifting incessantly.

020

Even as wife and husband knew about their missing ‘daughter’ on ‘the second night’ from her ‘class teacher’, they did not initiate a search; even as they found out about the ‘front tooth’ in their postbox, they did not call the police. Yet it appears the rationale behind that wasn’t because of something such as ‘given she’s leaving home, she must want people to worry about her, so there’s no need to worry about her’.

It is apparently something much simpler – a fear of having their neglectful parenting exposed – that made them reluctant to let the police inside their house, to the extent that they wouldn’t even report, say, a thief breaking into their house.

Because they’ve done bugger all in terms of raising their children.

And they’re doing bugger all even if one of them got kidnapped.

Which sounds like too much to bear, but it’s quite expected; maybe the perpetrator specifically targeted kids like these – kids whose parents wouldn’t say a word if they got hurt.

So could the incendiary act of putting the front tooth in the postbox be foreshadowing a future ransom? Not that anybody has received anything like a ransom note…

‘Please, sorry, I am guilty too. Because, even though I knew what that family was like, I said nothing about them doing nothing – nothing.’

‘……’

If you say that, then I’m guilty too.

I called the police right after I saw that staircase landing without saying a word to those parents, although I could have gone it alone much earlier, when Higasa-chan was still telling me about the specifics.

To seek confirmation with relevant parties before taking action… such a textbook response may have delayed my discovery – if I called the police immediately after listening to the thing that 'stays in this room', then maybe the kidnapper and Benikujaku-chan would still have been on the staircase landing.

If it wasn't for Ononoki-chan egging me on, I'd probably still not have called the police at all – a chilling thought.

'Now, please, the family are making a giant fuss.'

Benihibari said.

They're making a giant fuss? 'A giant fuss'?

That's weird, I thought that with the press not allowed to report it, they wouldn't be all outside their front door…

'Excuse me, it was not them, it was, the f-father of my younger sister…her birth father came knocking…'

I see, it was said that she was his daughter from a previous marriage.

So he is her actual father – then it is no surprise that he would know from the police about his birth daughter getting kidnapped.

Even though it's only been half a day since I called the police, it seems things are moving at a quicker pace than I thought – Japan's police really are great at their job, although when I say that, it sounds more like I'm bragging about my parents.

'Then my father contacted me, and he said this to me, he said, "this isn't you, is it?"'

'……'

I've never thought about that – in fact, not until you've mentioned it.

An older sister, extremely worried about her solitary younger sister…so worried, she might grab her younger sister on the latter's

way back home from school.

Story-wise, it sounds entirely plausible.

At first glance, it sounds like it can happen – but a story like that leaves the 'front tooth in the postbox' foreshadowing unresolved.

If they saw the horrid sight that is the staircase landing, then it would've been impossible to make that kind of deduction – and yet it was the father who said all that.

If such a severe and dry deduction came from a renowned detective, then it may have been met with praise; to have come from the father, not so much…

It's already bad news to know her younger sister got kidnapped without a shadow of a doubt, but to now know she's being suspected by her parents…I wonder what Benihibari's feeling.

'No, please, it is alright, okay. That man has always been like that. But, if he is the man I know – my father, that is – then he would not hesitate in letting the police know about this too.'

Benihibari said, as she sipped her cup of black coffee, and then immediately added three sugar cubes from the sugar pot – maybe it was bitterer than she thought, or perhaps it shows she's still not calmed down.

'After all, this, I have thought about this before – ah, but it is not kidnapping, okay? When I started living on my own, I thought maybe, my sister…Kujaku…maybe I should take her with me.'

'……'

Benihibari said as she twirled her long hair – from an interviewer's perspective, that long hair doesn't look too tidy. Then again, I'm not exactly one to talk about hairstyles, but if she's going to a corporate interview later on, it'd be better if she tidied it up a little.

No, now I'm just sticking my nose into where it doesn't belong.

If I say it out loud, I'm going to somehow end up cutting another woman's hair – how many times has it been already?

'B-but, please, I would never do such a thing as rip out Kujaku's front tooth, please, I would never. Yes, it would be absolutely impossible. Yep, never. Besides – as Araragi-san saw, the landing… I, although I am yet to hear the details…not that the newspapers would put it to print…but, according to my father –'

Benihibari continued stutteringly…seems she's trying her best to sound calm, but it's obvious at this point just how flustered she is.

If this was an interview, she would've failed already – I heard that's how difficult it is to find a job these days.

Presumably she started looking for work in her first year to take care of her younger sister – for her sister who lived with her in the same room, in an empty house.

This is getting heavy.

But now it seems necessary to tell everything I saw to my yearmate…because she doesn't seem to dare do anything, after hearing that biased information from her father.

Much as I promised Ononoki-chan to not involve myself in this case any further, I'm sure this is still safe, right? – was how I convinced myself. I'm not saving someone after they asked for help; this is the most I'm going to do.

I sincerely hope this doesn't turn into a life-or-death choice again… then again, it's only normal, as a human being – so;

'What I say stays between you and me.'

I started, with that sentence.

I of course cannot mention anything about the Tiny Oddity Trio, but I tried relaying to her in as much detail as I can about what I went through, from Higasa-chan talking to me about this, to the restlessness, to the search for the missing small girl, to what I saw on the emergency staircase landing in the parkade.

But, having basically said the same things as I did in the police station last night, now that I'm telling this more objectively, I do wonder what I was thinking – it's a miracle they didn't arrest me on the spot, and I'm not even joking.

'So I see…well then, please excuse me for the embarrassing embarrassment.'

Benihibari lowered her head in regret as I finished – no, this isn't something for you to apologise.

You're really making yourself look like the kidnapper here.

Or could she have meant the Beniguchi family when she said 'embarrassment'? I made sure to keep Agent Ononoki's breaking and entering a secret – then again, that wasn't the only bit that could be called embarrassing.

'So…well, if even a first witness as suspicious as I am didn't get nicked, I don't think you'll get arrested either, Benihibari, no matter what your father says.'

'Benihibari?'

Whoops.

I've let it slip.

'Sorry, sorry…bad habit of mine to come up with nicknames for people I first meet.'

The bad habit was actually Higasa-chan's, but I'll have to take this for her.

'So that is what that is so…in primary school, people called me Benishouga [紅生姜, lit. "red ginger"] in primary school.'

'Benishouga?'

'Oh!'

Benishouga…no, Benihibari covered her mouth.

Looks like she accidentally blurted out an old nickname she didn't quite like…and speaking of which, I don't think Benihibari's a good nickname either.

But 'Benikujaku-chan' really has taken root.

'Benikujaku-chan…if my sister heard it, she would be really happy to hear you call her that.'

'…If you say that…'

Higasa-chan'd be really happy too.

'She must be alive' or 'she will be fine' – these I couldn't bring my heart to say, to console, having witnessed that staircase landing.

It must be tragically rough for her too, right – getting snatched on her way back home from school, imprisoned in an emergency stairwell, stripped bare of her clothes and robbed of her teeth?

Even an immortal vampire would flinch upon being inflicted with such pain – not to mention how she wasn't in a happy situation to begin with.

An empty house. Neglect.

A neglected child – a neglected life.

Two sisters.

'Please, Araragi-san, what do you think, please?'

'Eh? – what do you mean?'

The last thing I wanted was for her to ask something like if I think her sister's alive, but that's not what Benihibari asked.

'Did you not go across the next town just to look for a small girl you have never even seen…whom you have only ever heard of, did you? On the other hand, there are parents who, even when their child does not come home – or even if they think they are lost – would take no action. What do you think of a world which is like

that?'

The world, huh.

What do I think of this world?

A world like this – honestly, the moment I saw the staircase landing, I felt like the world had betrayed me.

I wouldn't say I live in a woolly world of peace, prosperity and amity – I have gone through my share of hell and nightmares – but even so, there's a part of me who still believes in this world.

I feel like I'm living in a comfort zone – people dying, getting hurt, getting bloodied, these are all things I'm still whisking away, as if they're not part of this world.

Yes.

I've severed oddities from the world I'm living in – even though if there's one thing I've felt, it's how close I am to the world of oddities.

Closer than a wall's width, closer than a paper's width.

Is that what I meant when I said I 'want to see a greater world'? No, that's not it.

There's Hanekawa's incident, and then there's Sodachi's incident. Both of which, at their core, had nothing to do with oddities… didn't Oshino ceaselessly remind me not to blame everything on oddities?

So stop pretending that the world is wonderful, or that this was the first time that realisation hit since finishing high school.

That's the real embarrassment.

'……'

…That reminds me, back when Oshino took over the problems with Hanekawa's family, if I had to say it, I don't think he took

Hanekawa's side, but rather took the side that neglected, and later even physically abused Hanekawa – her parents' side.

It was for that reason that high school me was left with the impression that all adults are the same…but that centrist could have been trying to tell me that, for unqualified parents, simply telling them they're unqualified solves nothing.

Not that I'm close to doing that.

The most I've done was ask for the parents' names.

'I am very sorry, that was a weird question, do you not shall think?'

'No…I think you're serious.'

The really weird thing would be 'do you not shall think', but I'm someone who has never been to any networking events, let alone written a CV; in front of a job-hunter at her wit's end, I don't have anything to say.

It could prove useful, even.

'Do you not shall think'.

'I think all I can say is "this world is bigger than you think". Anything can happen. Just because you've graduated from high school doesn't mean your life is over.'

'…Just because I've graduated from high school, huh, is that it, huh.'

The intention behind such positivistic words was to cheer this older sister up a little, having been framed by her father, but Benihibari seemed stuck in deep thought – don't tell me she's now thinking what happens after graduating from university.

Or perhaps she's thinking about her younger sister, whose graduation from primary school has been thrown into uncertainty, let alone from high school – saying 'your life is over' was insensitive of me.

Before I could apologise, Benihibari raised her head back up, and said,

‘Thank you very much verily, Araragi-san. I have learnt a lot from you I have.’

Is she about to finish? Then again, I’ve given her all I can give.

‘Uh, the invoice –’

‘It’s okay, I’ll take care of it. I didn’t help you with anything in the end, so at the very least, I should help you with this.’

It’s my parents’ hard-earned cash, but I’m making it sound like she owes me…some golden child I really am.

‘I’m grateful for your gratuitousness.’

She accepted without hesitation, as she let out another ‘thank you very much verily’, stepping on what I imagine are equally uncomfortable pumps, quickly walking away from the cafeteria, as I thought to myself, ‘Hm?’

It wasn’t that she didn’t ask me if I think her younger sister was alive; if anything, I’m grateful she didn’t ask that…but isn’t it strange that she opened with as serious a question as ‘what do you make of the world’?

Having went ahead and played detective myself, I’m very happy she didn’t suspect me one bit…though the reason why she asked that was because we mentioned those neglectful parents.

What do you think of a world with parents like this?

…If I were to answer without pretending to be positive, the model answer would probably be ‘nothing much’, but if that was the question posed, then maybe ‘parents’ should have been ‘kidnappers’ instead.

Of course I think lowly of parents who neglect their children, but if you suggest the kidnapper who snatched a year five schoolgirl and ripped out all her teeth was a better person than the Beniguchi

parents, then that I cannot agree with.

Dismissing the differences between ‘long-term violence’ and ‘short-term violence’ with ‘they’re all violence’ would be most careless – but why would Benihibari talk with the faux-detective poser that is me about her own parents?

Shouldn’t she have asked what I thought of the world, with such *criminals* –?

– Well then, please excuse me for the embarrassing embarrassment.

You’re *really* making yourself look like the kidnapper here.

‘……’

No, no, it can’t be, it can’t be.

Please, it mustn’t be, please.

It makes far more sense for her to be so scared of the kidnapper that she didn’t dare mention it – avoiding mentioning the kidnapper because she *was* the kidnapper just sounds forced.

I don’t even think I’m qualified to pass judgement on those parents now; to suspect the older sister who specifically dropped by because she’s worried about her younger sister, what the hell am I thinking?

Am I playing detective again?

…However, assuming she came by not to hear more about the case, but to find out how things are by approaching the first witness, then I don’t see how that would be unusual.

If I answered her questions incorrectly, would I, the witness, have been disposed of by Benihibari…? Or perhaps I’d be abducted somewhere. Seen too many suspense dramas, haven’t I? I don’t watch them a lot, but I guess I do get drawn in sometimes.

‘If it wasn’t for me overlooking a crucial piece of evidence in the staircase landing – or, whilst searching for Benikujaku-chan – I would’ve had my teeth pulled out’…thoughts like that aren’t just

fantasy, it's paranoia.

Wasn't I just thinking how an older sister this concerned about her younger sister could never have torn out the latter's teeth herself?

Why can't I just sympathise with her?

I'm such an ass.

I should've at least asked her which department she's in…wanting to allay what I can only describe as a minor suspicion, I was about to run after her, but I didn't.

I'm sure if I asked – although I haven't the slightest idea how – that she would give me a reassuring answer; and in the smallest chance that I don't, I've already decided that I'll leave matters in the hands of the law.

This is a firm decision.

Even just then, I've already walked into the grey area of a promise…having already done an objectively dubious search-and-rescue mission, I should stay away from making rash decisions; for my parents who believe in me, and for Gaen-san who protected me.

And even in that one-in-ten-thousand chance of Beniguchi Hibari kidnapping Beniguchi Kujaku, even if she was an inhumane, psychopathic criminal, the one who wields the right to punish her isn't me.

In the end, it's just someone getting killed by someone else.

The world's not going to stop turning.

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‘I wish I can say all of you have a future with infinite possibilities, but unfortunately, I can’t. If even I, a hapless, hopeless high schooler, could make his way into university, then for me to say stuff like “don’t waste the future” to you all, people far more talented than I am, would be a tad unconvincing.

‘I’m not the kind of senpai who has the renown to lecture you like this – I don’t know what Kanbaru or Higasa-chan said to you all, or rather, I can imagine what those two have been saying, but please set aside whatever falsities you’ve been hearing about me.

‘With that done, let’s start with the formalities.

‘Greetings to all incumbents of the Naoetsu Girls’ Basketball Club.

‘I’m Araragi Koyomi.

‘I was in Naoetsu High School myself up until last year, so you may have seen me with your own two eyes – yes, the one always quietly lurking in an unattended corridor, that’s me.

‘If you did indeed know me as that sulky, lonely high schooler, you must be wondering “why should I listen to the likes of you”, and that my advice would be worth nothing.

‘Not that there’s anything incorrect with that.

‘I may be your senpai in terms of age, but the same can’t be said for experiences in life – my experiences are only comparable to a middle school student.

‘Unlike you all, I never got to enjoy my teenage years.

‘No, really, in retrospect, even I really hated myself – but, I’d imagine such a self-deprecating rant is not what you’re here for.

‘One girl amongst you said to me not too long ago,

‘“Green as we are in our youth, that shade of green is deeper than you think. It’s a dark green bordering on darkness.” “Did it look like we were giggling and having a good time? Like high school girls with nothing to worry about?”

‘Those were “her” sincere words, and I believe it’s what everybody here thinks as well…when she said “we”, she meant every member.

‘Including people she never managed to get along with, such was her assertion – to which I offer no rebuttal.

‘So the reason I accepted this request wasn’t because Kanbaru asked me to, nor was it because Higasa-chan asked me to.

‘It’s for “her”.

‘Plus, I want to say sorry to all of you.

‘I want to apologise for this misunderstanding, and I want to apologise for my arrogance.

‘I once had put opinions like “adolescence isn’t necessarily fun” in the same vein as “rich people have a hard time too”; it’s a past version of myself I’m trying to eliminate.

‘Friendship reduces one’s intensity as a human.

‘That’s the kind of stylish excuse I used for the sake of hiding in my own shell, without ever imagining how intensely difficult it is to have friends – that having a companion to go through struggles together could diminish and reduce one’s life.

‘No, it’d actually be really easy.

‘Life’s dead easy if you don’t have any friends.

‘Exceedingly comfortable.

‘I say this having acquired a taste for this luxury – don’t be like me. If you become like me, you turn into me.

‘If even a high school failure like me could turn out so brilliant – I

can’t bring myself to say anything like that. This isn’t some set-up for a joke, this is serious.

‘This isn’t me being humble or me kicking myself.

‘This is plain fact.

‘Even today, I’m still the same; even in uni, I’m still trying to salvage what I lost in high school. The three years I spent in high school isn’t something that can be looked back on with “those were the days” just yet.

‘I’m in the middle of a rehabilitation.

‘I’m supposed to talk about my experiences, but if anything, don’t learn from me. Instead, I’m going to disappoint you by saying – give everything your all.

‘Give it everything.

‘Studying, playing, working, relaxing, making friends, falling in love – I never did any of them well.

‘Don’t think to yourself, “it’s fine either way”.

‘Don’t think to yourself, “it’s fine if I’m dead”.

‘And never think that you’d be better off dead; if we’re all going to die, then there’s no reason it has to be tomorrow.

‘And if you don’t, you’ll find yourselves doing it in no time;

‘You’ll turn into me – you’ll become a monster.’

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‘Right! That’s a wrap! Good work!’

With a ‘cut’, Higasa-chan pressed the stop button on her smartphone’s camera app – wait, doesn’t that mean her cheery last line got recorded too?

And with me being serious for once as well…

‘Forgive me for being blunt, but you should’ve been more optimistic! Seriously, Araragi-senpai, the reason why it’s like this now is because you insisted on not using the script I gave you! And after having gone the extra mile to accommodate a big-shot VIP…’

‘That’s because, Higasa-chan, the script you wrote had a BL gag every five seconds…’

‘But with a great quote to live by every twenty minutes!’

‘That’s even worse! It’s too long.’

Reviving the Naoetsu High School Girls’ Basketball Club, Phase I: Operation ‘A Video Message from an Esteemed Pioneer’.

As I’ve made clear in that message, ‘an esteemed pioneer’ is a giant lie, so frankly, I don’t think this’ll turn out great, but since this was Higasa-chan’s pet project, refusing her was pretty much impossible – only with the BL gag-laden script did I manage to successfully resist.

Incidentally, this is all happening in a place that’s not my room – not with Hitagi-san having warned that she’s watching me. Even so, going to Higasa-chan’s house would also be risky, so I ended up in neutral territory – that is, the Kanbaru household.

We didn’t film it in Kanbaru’s own room, of course (this came up at short notice, so I didn’t have time to tidy her room); we filmed it at a different spacious room inside the house.

Which means Kanbaru is also part of the production – she was on a second camera, filming me from a different angle. I heard they wanted to take footage from cameras 1 and 2 then cut them together…I don't see the point in putting all that work just for a home-made video message.

Incidentally, the reason why the typically raucous Kanbaru didn't make a sound was because she wasn't used to operating a smartphone (the phone's mine; Kanbaru's still rocking a feature phone), which is taking up all her concentration…she doesn't seem to know how to stop recording, as she continued filming myself talking with Higasa-chan.

If this went on air, it'd be bad.

As bad as a broadcasting blunder – thinking back on it, the bit where I was pretending to be serious ended up quite dark; should we start over?

'Nah, this is fine, no?'

Kanbaru said, seemingly finally able to find a way to stop recording – although she still didn't seem to know how to press stop, which means she probably just shut the phone off.

'That speech was fantastic, Araragi-senpai; no wonder I hold you in such high esteem! You've really touched my heart! Out of everything, I want to end up exactly like Araragi-senpai!'

'If that's the case, then I don't think my speech was effectively inspiring at all.'

Eh, whatever.

I couldn't muster up the emotions to say something happy at this moment anyway – not that I'm a bright personality to begin with.

Much as I can't be honest about everything, I think it's still important to let everyone know the truth.

'If anything, Kanbaru, I wanna be like the lil' scamp that you are. Do a substitution trick or something.'

No, that's not a 'trick'.

Seems I haven't fully cast away my faux-detective schtick…even if I pretended to be Kanbaru, what does that achieve in terms of mentoring my juniors?

'The thought of becoming someone like Araragi-senpai is a thought I'd never touch with a ten-foot pole', Higasa-chan said, 'but I'd like to be an adult as soon as I can. If my words get more convincing with age, then maybe my juniors would actually take what I have to say to heart.'

She ended softly.

'In summary, school uniforms are a drag. Wouldn't you say so, Ruga?'

'Obviously. Gets me the urge to take it all off sometimes. Especially in the streets.'

Personally, I think Kanbaru's urge can be attributed to a different reason…not that I couldn't understand it.

Uniforms are a symbol.

Now that I'm in uni, there is a part of me that misses not having to spend time choosing what to wear.

'That's another reason why we invited you, Araragi-senpai. Compared to us little rabble-rousers, the words of a uni student carry greater gravitas.'

'You know it's all the same, right?'

It's something that's leaving a lasting impression throughout this case.

People may change with the times, but whether they grow with the times is, I guess, a different question…or, to put it another way, even if one doesn't change deep down, as long as their title changes, then people would perceive them differently.

‘Anyway, as long as people can walk away from it thinking “eh, so that’s what a uni student’s like”, then I’m happy. I feel your juniors have a tendency to take things too seriously.’

‘No worries. I’m going to upload this to a video site, so it can be relished by all mankind.’

‘Stop. If the worldly Hanekawa ever saw it, I’d die from shame.’

I say all that, this is still an acceptable Phase I – them choosing to enlist me, of all people, aside, they do need some ‘outside perspective’.

In the hypothetical but plausible locality whereby a group of acquaintances, regardless of the relationship’s nature as overall leaning towards having fruitious or deleterious effects, find themselves in a state of figurative, if not additionally literal confinement and entanglement, form inseparable bonds under continuous and uninterrupted forward temporal movement, it is thenceforth guaranteed that any internally-set rule with the originally benign intention to function as mere informal multitudes of guidelines would heretofore enter such a state whereby the challenge or otherwise deliberate attempt to fail in discharging such functions, thereby sabotaging aforesaid items, would prove overly burdensome even amongst those most capable…although Oshino’s *lebensstil* could be interpreted as an outlier whose general application would see significant and highly visible and perhaps even risible obstacles in terms of individual, if not societal, acceptance, the demonstrably simplistic and indisputable observation that human beings, i.e. *homo sapiens*, share a common habitat speaks volumes on the considerable importance that ought to be awarded regarding the *sōtaika* [相対化, ‘relativisation’] of societal values.

If this video message makes it known to them that there exist other people outside of their hermetic circle, then, to me, it has served its purpose.

A hermetic circle…

Families are like that too.

Until someone from the outside points them out as strange or inappropriate, any house rule would be enforced as if they are nothing out of the ordinary.

‘Take, for example, me bathing with my younger sisters. It took until middle school when someone else pointed out to me that I thought it was strange.’

‘Araragi-senpai, you only *pretended* that it was normal before someone else pointed it out, didn’t you…’

Besides, I kept going into the bath with my younger sisters in high school; if we view it from a more global perspective, it’s true that certain cultures would find it completely natural to see a family bathing together.

One can’t be certain about everything.

‘Mm? What about it, Araragi-senpai? Why would you segue the topic at hand into talking about family? Although it is true that I see and love everybody in the Girls’ Basketball Club as family.’

Wouldn’t that take too much of a toll?

That’s precisely the bad influence you have on your juniors, you lil’ – no, I can’t say that.

It’s inevitable for the juniors to be starstruck with Kanbaru; instead of changing the values of that charismatic superstar that is Kanbaru, it’d be easier to change the values of the junior members themselves.

‘Uh, that’s because my mind’s been on something else recently – ah, right, Higasa-chan.’

I said, trying to change the topic. I can’t answer Kanbaru’s question, and besides, I had to apologise to Higasa-chan over something too.

‘Sorry I acted on my own. Must’ve surprised you when Benihibari came over.’

‘Benihibari?’

Higasa-chan tilted her head in confusion.

Crap – Benihibari is a nickname I made for her.

‘Beniguchi Hibari? Asking you through Mitonon? You know, when you told me the thing that “stays in the room” yesterday – your teammate’s senpai from middle school?’

‘What’re you talking about? Nobody came looking for me.’

What?

Actually, that makes sense; even if one reverses the five circles, it wasn’t strictly necessary to contact Kanbaru or Higasa-chan to get to me.

Having briefly seen face-to-face with Mitonon, she could’ve made a little shortcut – maybe she heard my name from her father (in the middle of him pointing the finger at her), then asked her junior Mitonon for verification.

‘Am I the only one who thinks there’s an inherent danger in Araragi-senpai dead set on calling her “Mitonon”?’

‘I saw Benikujaku-chan’s older sister in campus today during lunch; I thought she met with you first, Higasa-chan…’

Kanbaru’s danger radar is quite an accurate one indeed, and if Higasa-chan was telling the truth, then it would be dangerous to continue talking about this, albeit in a different sense.

I assumed Higasa-chan already knew about the things I only learnt through that rampaging episode last night, but if she doesn’t know, then technically I’d have broken the injunction.

Even if she was the one who gave me the information that was supposed to ‘stay in this room’, I don’t want to repay her with something like ‘it turns out, she not only had one tooth plucked out, but all of them’…unlike Benihibari, Higasa-chan isn’t directly related to the victim.

It’s just that now I’ve brought it up with the endlessly nosey high

school girl (and her troublesome best friend), how should I stop this from snowballing? – this calls for some delicate judgement.

Having mentioned Mitonon, I'm sure if Higasa-chan wanted to know, she'd have the right connections herself.

Stealthily segue into something else, I thought to myself – but Higasa-chan replied with,

'If you're talking about meeting her, I don't think that's possible.'

'? You don't think it's possible for me to meet her?'

'You're talking about Benikujaku-chan's older sister, right? Yep. Impossible. Araragi-senpai, could you have mistaken somebody else with her?'

'Mistaken? I'm pretty sure it's her. Because Benikujaku-chan's older sister is in Manase Uni, just like me –'

'Yes, that'd be correct. I don't know how you know, Araragi-senpai, but I did some digging myself. After giving what I know to Araragi-senpai, I figured that "Mitonon's senpai in middle school" is too vague a piece of data, which is a source of embarrassment, so I went home and did a little investigation.'

'I've no idea what you're on about, Higasa-chan, but what's gotten into you…?'

Kanbaru asked.

'Because, you see, I model myself after the school journalists you see in shōnen manga! My catchphrase is "I'll take this exclusive scoop!", and my nickname is "Hyena"!'

Higasa-chan ejaculated, giving a thumbs-up.

Why would you want to be someone who doesn't look to be very popular…? What's wrong with being an antelopish basketball player like you are right now?

That aside, Higasa-chan turned towards me:

‘And what I’ve found is that, yes, Beniguchi Kujaku-chan’s older sister is indeed a student in Manase National University, just like Araragi-senpai, but she appears to have applied for overseas travel, so shouldn’t that mean she’s abroad?’

‘Abroad? Abroad, like –’

Hanekawa?

No.

Going abroad to study, to find employment, to find oneself – we may have touched upon this previously, but –

‘She’s not busy finding herself, she just has a few buddies from high school who started their grad trip late. It’s a bit like that “new school, finally out of home, spreading your wings” kind of feeling she’s going through. By the way, they’re headed to Ayers Rock, in Australia.’

Ah.

They’re going to ban climbing it soon, aren’t they?

No, when it comes to travel destinations, you can just discuss and come to an agreement with your friends later.

‘So to give an update to “what I said stays in this room”, she went away from home, and left Japan; as soon as that happened, her little sister got snatched – and that’s the gist of her email asking Mitonon for help. That’s all the details I got after asking a few questions.’

So in other words, since she’s overseas, she can’t do anything in Japan, so she went to lengths to contact her old junior from middle school…was that it?

To give her credit, even if things were embarrassing between her and family, with a possibly-kidnapped little sister – not to mention a front tooth in the postbox – it’s only reasonable to do anything in your power to head back.

The fact that she chose the relatively nearby Manase University after graduating leaves even little doubt – though since she's abroad, not everything would go to plan.

I've never travelled abroad, so I can't say from experience, but I can imagine it being tricky to change dates on a plane ticket…you'd have to book a seat first, and more than that, she's on a student trip, so it might be a package tour.

Cancelling that could incur fees of its own.

Since she couldn't come back at once, I can understand why she'd put that sliver of hope on others…I imagine Mitonon wasn't the only person she approached.

It's an explanation I'm content with, but that means an even bigger mystery has arisen.

'Then who on earth was I meeting with at lunchtime, in the recruit suit?'

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I hadn't asked her for her student card, and she seemed to be familiar with what was happening inside the Beniguchis, so I had zero doubt that the Recruit Suit-san I was meeting with was Beniguchi Hibari…but come to think of it, the only proof I had was her self-introduction.

Ononoki-chan was the one who assisted by sneaking into the Beniguchi residence, so I've no idea what Benikujaku-chan's older sister looked like – let alone which department she's in.

I didn't even know she existed up until yesterday.

So then… yes, but, then this, so even with this crude impersonation, I'd take the bait…er, but why put on the act then?

That must be it.

She wanted to coax the details from me – even with a gagging order, if I'm dealing with a relative of a child victim, my mouth naturally loosens up; I'd try explaining everything to them, even with a heavy heart…that's the thinking I've cornered myself into.

Then that would mean Benihibari – no, not Benihibari – that would mean Impostor Benihibari was the real kidnapper. That thought reared its head once again.

If the kidnapper pretended to be the older sister – that'd spell the resurrection of my paranoia.

To make sure if I saw anything I wasn't meant to see – that's why the evil kidnapper went to lengths to break into the uni I'm in…if her real identity wasn't 'the sister who's worrying about her little sister', then for her to be the person who ripped out all the small girl's teeth wouldn't be odd at all.

It wouldn't be right, but it wouldn't be odd.

– Please excuse me for the embarrassing embarrassment.

…Was there anything that the kidnapper wouldn't have wanted anybody to see? It just looks like someone threw a bunch of miscellaneous, unwanted items on the staircase landing…

What did I see?

What did I not *see?*

Think back, was there anything amiss on those emergency stairs? Actually, the entire staircase was downright eerie, let alone amiss…

I can definitely think back, since that sight was burnt into my brain, and I was the first to discover it – wait a sec. Wait a sec, wait a sec.

If the lady in the recruit suit wasn't Benihibari but the kidnapper, then not only was I not the first witness, I've even witnessed the perpetrator.

The small girl's kidnapper, the criminal, the person of interest.

The first thing I can't forget was her repetitively polite demeanour – in all honesty, that played a part in tearing down my guard, too.

Except she not only tore things down, but also tore things out…or am I jumping to conclusions?

Have I jumped to jumping to conclusions?

For the umpteenth time?

That said, even if Impostor Benihibari wasn't the kidnapper, one thing's certain: she's not Benikujaku-chan's stepsister – it could be a woman journalist who's after an exclusive scoop, or, for that matter, an actual detective hired by the parents, faking her identity just to talk to me; could the parents have hired someone? Is that possible?

Right, calm down, let's go through this one by one.

Don't go and think about everything at once; first, let's find out what we can confirm among us. That is to say, the part where it wasn't Beniguchi Hibari who sat down with me.

‘Higasa-chan. I want to ask something of you; don’t ask any questions.’

‘Alrighty then. I’ll pretend to be your fiancée and meet your parents.’

‘None of us have said anything remotely related to that until now.’

‘Hey, Higasa, aren’t you getting a bit too close with my Araragi-senpai?’

Kanbaru revealed her jealousy against her close friend.

I was going to say that the superstar had her cute side too, but her jealousy can also simply be described as ‘frickin’ dangerous’ (more dangerous than even Hitagi, in a certain sense), so I’d better be careful – it seems my retorts need to be dulled in terms of specificity.

My Araragi-senpai, no less.

‘You’ve got a pic? Of Beniguchi Hibari-san.’

I said, turning things down a notch.

If a photo exists, then I can be sure that the woman I saw in a recruit suit wasn’t Beniguchi Hibari-san – Higasa-chan could’ve gotten old info from Mitonon; maybe she’s already made her way back to Japan.

In the worst case, even without a direct flight, it’s still possible to come back with a transfer – not exactly practical for a year one student at uni, but it is practicable.

She then obliviously went face-to-face with the evil kidnapper, and maybe she got killed then and there. Maybe I wasn’t willing to consider that possibility, but it’s something worth verifying.

‘Hmm~ I wonder…I’ll have to check with Mitonon, but even then, I don’t think she’ll have a recent photo of hers; it’s more likely that she has an older photo from years ago, but if it’s too old, then it’d be meaningless, no? No point in showing you what she looked like

in junior high, don't you think? Besides, I'm not giving it away for free.'

'What? You're not giving it away for free?'

Why?

Why would money figure into this conversation?

'I'm an information broker.'

'You are not an information broker.'

'It's not money that I want. Yeah, so, Mitonon's actually had something like a crush on you for the past year or so; will you go on a date with her?'

'Don't say something so important so nonchalantly! You're the one who made the Girls' Basketball Club so awkward to be in, weren't you, you scamp!?'

'Calling me a scamp? You've made me very happy. You've always called Ruga the scamp and used "you" for me, which can be a bit distant sometimes~'

Higasa-chan showcased her surprisingly delicate side, as her fingers slid smoothly on my smartphone that filmed me just now – she's not uploading this for the world to see, is she?

If she wants me to call her a scamp too, then I shall happily oblige. On the other hand, if this is what it takes to be Kanbaru's best friend…their juniors must've had it really rough.

'Woah, Mitonon's real mad now. You see, Araragi-senpai, I revealed her true feelings to you.'

'If that's what you did, I think that's a normal reaction.'

I can't see it from this angle, but it appears a bombastic war of words is playing out on her phone…LINE, I presume?

'No, it's on Twitter.'

‘Don’t duke it out on Twitter! The whole world’s gonna see it!’

Hitagi, Hanekawa, the Girls’ Basketball Club…if people saw the venerable OG Club turning against each other,[17] then my video message isn’t going to help at all!

‘Understood, then I’ll move it to LINE…woah, she’s spammed every angry sticker she has my way!’

‘…Doesn’t that mean she’s not actually that angry?’

‘If stickers are like hieroglyphics, then one could say modern communication has returned to the good old days, hasn’t it?’

When you think about it, in the future, social messaging apps are going to be like what the Rosetta Stone is to us now.

Both unconfident on modern machinery, Kanbaru and I watched on anxiously. Although Mitonon’s anger didn’t fully subside, in the end, she sent over a picture of, as she calls her, ‘Beniguchi-senpai’.

Such speediness when it comes to texting or arguing for the modern high school girl.

‘Here you go, for your viewing pleasure. It was taken a while ago, but it’s not ancient; this is what Benikujaku-chan’s stepsister looks like. Ta-da～’

Don’t think the ‘ta-da’ was necessary…

I looked at the smartphone screen that was passed over to me, trying to confirm the person in the photo…was this taken with a phone?

No, it’s a postcard.

A postcard with the words ‘I’ve moved out’ written on it – having gone away from her old home and started living alone…she’s so happy she finally left home that she wrote postcards for her juniors, is that what’s going on?

The quality’s not good, but the postcard dates back a few months,

so it's a useful source, I thought as I zoomed in with a pinch (I at least know you can do that).

'…Wait.'

I grasped for words as I saw that person smiling, peace sign held out.

'*What the hell is going on here…?*'

What's going on wasn't what was going on.

Or could it be, that's what's going on?

Then that would mean this didn't start from today.

I – *we* have made a giant mistake right from the beginning. An unthinkable, unsalvageable mistake.

…No.

It can be done.

It can be salvaged – it can be saved.

Benikujaku-chan's life – and her future.

'Then, as promised, Araragi-senpai, you'll have to go on a date with Mitonon.'

'No, I'm not going on a date.'

'What? Not even a date?'

024

I never thought I'd end up on the Kitashirahebi Shrine for the second night in a row, with the same cast.

A stupid uni student, Araragi Koyomi; a young girl freshly awoken from her slumber, Oshino Shinobu; a tween girl who shows zero expression, Ononoki Yotsugi; a little girl who's also a god, Hachikuji Mayoi – the avoidant quartet is back in action for the second night in a row.

'Sorry about bothering you all again, even though I've already done that just yesterday. But there's something I have to get off my chest.'

'Yeah, yeah. So, Mister Vampy, out of the three of us: shag, marry, kill?'

'I haven't gathered you here just so we could play something you see in like a girls' meetup.'

That'd be a three-choice life or death question, not a two-choice question.

And whatever the answer was, the end result would've been 'kill'. Araragi Koyomi being killed, that is.

Anyway, jokes aside, although it's difficult to tell beneath that expressionless face of hers, Ononoki-chan doesn't seem too happy about being here – unlike last night, I had to practically beg just so she could come with me.

Since she's watching me, I could've just gone out and chances are she would've followed, but I wanted to draw a line.

Draw a clear distinction.

'I'm under the impression that yesterday's saga has ended badly, Araragi-san? I heard it from Ononoki-san.'

It appears Hachikuji has already treated ‘what stays in the room’ as ‘what’s done and dusted’ – then it seems she also knows about what I saw on the staircase landing; then again, pure and innocent as she may look, this little girl has been through hell and back.

She’s had a hard life.

Which may mean she has a surprisingly high tolerance for tragedies…besides, she’s a god now; one small girl wouldn’t be the only thing living rent free in her head.

And as for Shinobu, well, what else can I say.

It’s not as late as last night was, so she’s half-asleep.

Which means everybody gathered here wasn’t in a good mood – yes, I’m not in high spirits either.

Which is seriously embarrassing.

‘If it was a kidnapping, I’d make a clean exit’. It sounded great, that declaration. Yet here I am, that sentence haunting me as I remained on the front lines.

Seriously uncool.

But, just as I couldn’t pretend to not know after knowing, I couldn’t pretend to be unaware after being made aware – I’m going it alone if push comes to shove.

‘First, I’d like you three to look at this.’

I displayed my smartphone, on which that photo of a postcard sent to me from Higasa-chan can be seen – it’s now the only source of light in the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

The shrine doesn’t have any electric lamps running through it, so once it gets dark, it gets *dark* – hence an exceptionally bright image beaming from the smartphone.

And the person on the phone screen was of course:

‘This is –’

Benihibari – Beniguchi Hibari.

A ‘moving out’ notice sent to her junior from middle school, Shounou Mitono – the person in the postcard looks like an eighteen-year-old girl, freshly graduated from high school; there’s nothing unusual about the postcard itself.

I bet a hundred out of a hundred people would look at the postcard and say ‘what about it?’ That was about the reaction I got from the little girl, the young girl, and the tween girl.

As for me?

There’s two things I can say.

Firstly, this person is definitely not the lady in the recruit suit I had tea with back at lunchtime – the differences are such that anybody can see that.

Shinobu, being an oddity, fares less well when it comes to telling humans apart, but even she can tell it was someone else – which is good, in the sense that it’s something within expectations; I asked Higasa-chan to get me this item of digital data precisely to confirm what I had in mind.

Mitonon may have made a great sacrifice in all this, but sadly there’s nothing I can do for her – the reason being the second thing I can say, something I didn’t account for.

The postcard Mitonon sent was a picture of Manase University’s entrance ceremony, a photo of all the new students outside the main entrance, with flowers decorating the standing vertical signboard.

She did say this was from a while back.

And the university entrance ceremony was indeed ‘a while back’.

A photo that truly represents ‘turning a new leaf’. As far as choosing a photograph for announcing one’s moving out, it was most

apropos – yet what grabbed my attention wasn't the scenery of Manase University or the signboard in the entrance ceremony.

It was her – Beniguchi Hibari.

More specifically, her *dress*.

'It's clear that the Beniguchi Hibari in this photo isn't the same person as the one I saw today, but – this suit she's wearing in the entrance ceremony was the exact same suit as the one I saw earlier today.'

Different people, but in an identical fashion – the same suit, and even the same shoes: a pair of pumps. I remember this vividly because her gait was visibly unsteady.

'…So 'tis not a recruit suit?'

Shinobu asked with painful forthrightness.

No, I only thought it was because I saw her on-campus, but it doesn't seem to be the case – more to the point, I've no idea what the difference is between the suit one wears when job-hunting, and the suit one wears for an entrance ceremony.

Allow me to explain: I originally thought she was a few years above me, and it's a reasonable thought when you see anybody wearing a suit in uni.

Then again, it is true that new students don suits when they first go into uni…probably.

'"Probably", why are you being so vague, Araragi-san? Wasn't it only a few months ago when you entered uni yourself?'

'Uh, yeah, about that. For reasons I'm not delving into, I didn't attend it myself.'

'It's a bit of a running theme at this point, but why are you trying to cast yourself as a rebel?'

Even the god was flabbergasted.

It's not like I didn't attend because I'm trying to cast myself as a rebel, but then again, that's also why I hadn't realised until now – why I hadn't thought of that situation.

Thinking back, I was the one who brought up recruitment to Impostor Benihibari, something she probably ad libbed a conversation with – hm, as strict as a job fair's dress code can go, and even if there was a seminar or a tutorial session, no fresher would go around uni in a recruit suit.

'Mm? Then what *was* going on, Mister Vampy? You were having tea with someone who wasn't Beniguchi Hibari, but she was wearing Beniguchi Hibari's clothes, and assuming Beniguchi Hibari's name; if you think of the clothes as part of her disguise, then that wouldn't be strange at all, would it?'

'If she's changing into her clothes, *why wear the suit she entered uni with?* It'd be a different story if she disguised as a high school girl. Like, say you're dressing as Kanbaru or Higasa-chan: you'd have a greater chance of success if you got hold of a Naoetsu High School uniform. But Beniguchi Hibari's a uni student. Surely it'd be more believable if she wore something more fashionable, like a bodycon dress.'

'Trendy as bodycons may be, no sane uni student's going to wear that on campus.'

Ononoki-chan may have responded with a retort, but it seems she got what I meant – no ordinary student in uni would wear the suit they wore for the entrance ceremony daily.

If Impostor Benihibari was the kidnapper trying to dress as a year one uni student, then it'd be more convincing if she wore casual clothes – look at Senjougahara Hitagi, for instance.

She dyed her hair brown and even manicured her nails, looking exactly 'university student like' – I say 'like', she *is* a university student herself, but the point is, if you're disguising as that, shouldn't your disguise be headed in that direction?

And yet, Impostor Benihibari chose a suit.

So what's going on?

'Benihibari herself only wore that once, in the entrance ceremony, right? I don't think wearing the suit automatically makes you look like Benihibari…the suit itself isn't iconic of Benihibari…'

'It probably isn't like Mister Oshino, whose mere mention evokes a Hawaiian shirt.'

Of course, it's always a non-zero chance.

It could be that Beniguchi Hibari loves that suit, and therefore wears it every day – but then it'd still be meaningless to meet me dressed like that.

Because I wouldn't know if she wears it daily.

If Beniguchi Hibari was well-known for wearing suits, then that's a different story…or, on the flip side, it could be because of the suit that nobody would think it was Beniguchi Hibari donning it (and mistake her for a senior).

Which is all to say that Impostor Benihibari may not be wearing that suit for the sake of disguising as Benihibari – there could be a different reason at play.

'By the way, the suit that Beniguchi Hibari-san's wearing in the postcard, how did the lady get hold of it? Could it be that the kidnapper not only got the younger sister, but also the older sister – no, that couldn't be. We did confirm that the older sister is at Ayers Rock.'

Whilst there is no confirmation that she's still at Ayers Rock, that would also mean she's not in Japan; since she's living alone, that means there's nobody in her abode.

'– So you're saying the kidnapper broke into an empty place and stole that suit, right, Araragi-san? Instead of buying this mass-produced product, she went and got the exact suit Benihibari-san once wore?'

'Funny, isn't it? It actually sounds more plausible than

coincidentally having the same fashion sense.'

I'm reminded of her unease in that suit.

It looks like she wasn't used to wearing it, but wouldn't that be because that suit wasn't hers to start with, hence the apparent unease? Presumably, wouldn't that mean the pumps don't fit her shoe size either?

'This blue sky thinking's real fun.'

Ononoki-chan interjected without emotion.

With even less emotion than usual.

'But I think it'd be more fun if we began with the conclusions. Why would this mysterious lady appear in front of Mister Vampy in Beniguchi Hibari's entrance ceremony suit; why would she be in a suit to begin with? What's your theory, Mister Vampy? Please, enlighten me, along with why it was *you* that she decided to appear in front of.'

'I've never worn a suit myself, but when you think about why people wear suits, it's mostly down to pretending to be *adult-like*. That'd be the main reason. I guess that'd also be the reason why one wears a suit in the entrance ceremony…so that's what I initially thought of. That she's a high school girl, pretending to be in university.'

She's not pretending to be a university student – she's pretending to be more mature.

This theory came from me talking with Higasa-chan and Kanbaru – whilst I don't know how serious they were, they did say that they sometimes wanted to take off their uniforms and be adults sooner.

Even though in Japan, suits are their own kind of uniform…but, whilst I did say 'high school girl', that was pure instinct.

She could be a middle school girl.

Or even – a primary school girl.

‘…? Nay, wait a moment, thee. This is one leap too far. Understand? I can see what thou art implying, yet even then –’

‘Exactly, Araragi-san. That’s just ridiculous, a primary school girl pretending to be a uni student. Even if they look mature – even if’

‘Even if they’re sisters – Mister Vampy.’

‘That’s why I want to ask you three something.’

I could’ve went it alone.

Getting the little girl, the young girl, and the tween girl involved last night not only resulted in nothing, I also wound up in the exact opposite place I wanted to be; having committed such a colossal failure, it is low of me to once again ask the little girl, the young girl, and the tween girl for help – but being the sagacious person I am not, all I can do is ask.

One looks like twelve, but is actually a *tsukumogami* corpse over a hundred years old – Ononoki Yotsugi. One looks like ten, but has actually been lost for eleven more years after she died – Hachikuji Mayoi. One looks like eight, but has actually lived through almost seventy-five times that – Oshino Shinobu.

There’s something I wanted to confirm with the oddity trio, whose *appearances belie their actual age*.

‘Suppose there’s a year five schoolgirl who grew into a uni student overnight – that she had a wish, which was to grow into an adult and therefore “leave home” as quickly as possible; is it possible for that wish to manifest, *as an oddity*?’

025

Dropping one milk tooth? Entirely reasonable.

Dropping twenty milk teeth at once? It's impossible – or so one would imagine, but if the kid grew *at once*, then wouldn't that make it quite possible?

There's also Impostor Benihibari's excessively mannerly speech.

And her being uncomfortable with the suit she was wearing; come to think of it, both can be grouped as trying to pretend as an adult, but failing – she ordered something adult-sounding – a black coffee – only to add three sugars; one can see it as a reflection of that contradiction between a young inner self, and a fully-fledged adult outer self.

Besides, I may not be a coffee enthusiast so I can't be certain, but if you order a coffee in that kind of shop, isn't black coffee what you'd get by default?

Both cream and sugar would already be on the table for patrons to flavour the drink to their tastes…it seems she has less of an idea how cafés work than even I.

Even though she's looking for a job, her long hair was unkempt, which isn't something desirable, but if that hair wasn't grown out, but grown *all at once* – then it can't be helped at all.

Maybe her mental age was lower than normal?

If you say that, then the same can be said for me.

But if it wasn't the case, then it wasn't her mental age that's the problem, it's her physical age that's abnormally high –

'…That's not the only reason why you think a small girl grew about ten years older in one night, is it, Mister Vampy?'

Having thought such a deduction would be laughed off, I was met

with Ononoki-chan's serious engagement – then again, being the expressionless girl she is, she wouldn't laugh at whatever foolishness I throw at her, but still, I'm grateful that she's willing to listen.

It's not like I'd be happier if I'm met with a shouty, 'make some noise!' kind of hype.

'Impostor Beniguchi mentioned her "embarrassment" when we talked about the staircase landing – I originally thought I had missed something and carefully re-examined things. But I can't think of anything I missed – I did catch everything. The abnormal amount of milk teeth, the stuff from the school backpack that's scattered…and the torn clothes.'

My original thought was that they were forcibly stripped…but was it really that easy to tear children's clothes? You'd need some significant arm strength, but that doesn't describe the Impostor Benihibari I saw; 'svelte' would be a better word.

And yet, those children's clothes weren't only taken off, they were *torn* – they weren't cut with scissors either.

Much as I hate thinking about it, it could be the result of a bloody fight, but not a single drop of blood could be found there – if there were, I should know, being the phoney vampire that I am.

Could it be that those children's clothes were torn from the inside? *When they no longer fit the child they were designed for because the child grew up* – that's when they burst, right? When the buttons on the blouse fly off, when the hooks on the dress sever – isn't that a result of the seams rupturing?

Consider the sad sight forcing children's clothes on a uni student would bring – this is something more than not being used to the clothes one's wearing.

Then the backpack on the back would be pressing into the shoulders; the only way to get out of it would be to violently shake it off, hence the tragic mess at the end – 'please excuse me for the embarrassing embarrassment'.

Those words may not have come from her as a kidnapper, but as a victim child – a thought that would bring me relief and satisfaction.

‘Then she’s not a victim child either. In this case – torn clothes, a large amount of teeth – there’s no criminality to it.’

No criminality.

In return, an oddity.

‘So you’re saying that because her clothes were torn, Benikujaku-chan had to borrow her older sister’s clothes?’

‘Considering what the Beniguchis are like, it wouldn’t be odd for her to carry a spare key; it’d be natural, even.’

Because she said she thought about taking her younger sister with her – that was a line from Impostor Benihibari, right?

But if Impostor Benihibari was actually the result of Benikujaku-chan’s ‘metamorphosis’, then that line could be what her older stepsister once said.

‘To grow so suddenly, to then seek her older sister for help, to find her to be somewhere else – then, an impromptu solution, with her assumed image of “this is what adults look like”, taking the suit that’s been on a hanger ever since term started and wearing it…all so people wouldn’t see she’s a child inside.’

That stuttering, that insecurity.

This doesn’t sound right, coming from someone she’s completely deceived, but she doesn’t seem the type to derive joy from lying.

‘Well, even if it wasn’t Araragi-san, nobody would see a woman in a suit in university and think “Mm? Is this a small girl?”…hmm. Getting lost or leaving home aside, a girl like this isn’t my speciality.’

Why would a god not specialise in the supernatural, I thought, but then again, it could be that different gods specialise in different things.

Speaking of specialisation –

‘In case you’ve forgotten, I’m the *shikigami* of the *onmyōji* who specialises in dealing with immortal oddities, Kagenui Yozuru. An oddity that grows from child to adult overnight isn’t something I’m familiar with. If anything, shouldn’t this be in the wheelhouse of that queen seductress?’

‘To whom thou dare assignest the epithet “queen seductress”?’

Shinobu responded, unimpressed.

But it’s right.

Oshino Shinobu was once the iron-blooded, hot-blooded, cold-blooded vampire, Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade, a legendary vampire, and at the same time, the King of Oddities.

Also known as the Oddity Slayer, she’s far up in the oddity hierarchy.

And ever since she became a young girl, she had also been under the tutelage of an all-rounded specialist, an authority of ghosts ’n’ goblins, Oshino Meme.

Knowledge from oddities, knowledge from humans.

She possesses both, a certain hybrid, if you will.

When my younger sister, Araragi Karen, fell victim to that bee oddity, a huge part of resolving it was down to the knowledge residing in that tiny body of hers.

Before long, Shinobu folded her arms, saying,

‘’Tis, however, would fall within range of the lost god’s duties.’

The lost god – Hachikuji?

Hachikuji passed it to Ononoki-chan, Ononoki-chan passed it to Shinobu, Shinobu passed it back to Hachikuji, what kind of hot potato is this – so I thought, but this isn’t a ball game; this is a

vortex. This vortical shape forms the path toward the crux of solving this case, a spiralling path.

One that eventually arrives at the centre.

‘*Utsuroi-nejiri* – a Revolver.’[18]

Shinobu continued.

‘Turning the clock, rolling, bending. Such is at play. At its end, at its heart, its true form is – a snail.’

A snail.

Euhadra – a terrestrial pulmonate gastropod.

026

The flat that the real Benihibari – Beniguchi Hibari – resides in on her own isn't hard to find at all.

If anything, barely any effort is needed.

Because within the 'moving out' notice that Mitonon received there was, of course, her new address – since I only have an image of the postcard, part of the address was cropped out, but as long as I have a room number and the name of the residence, the rest would be unnecessary.

Come and have fun!

Whilst we won't be following that imperative (an imperative that was addressed to Mitonon in the first place), we will be heading to her flat.

If there ever is a place with clues abound, that would be it.

Because no matter what, it's certain that Benikujaku-chan once entered this flat and borrowed the suit in the entrance ceremony.

As an extra note, chances are she also helped herself to a bit of cash…I might be the one who footed the cafeteria bill in the end, but she did offer to pay for her coffee.

Well, not that it would've been much; the 'thank you very much verily' back then was probably genuine – it is true that humans need money to live, and that humans need money to survive.

It may be that Benikujaku-chan thought that once you're an adult, you can do anything, but that's not really the case – having some of that aforementioned money is a must, and even if it was me who was naked thanks to the torn children's clothes, I'd have no idea what to do.

This is more than being stuck with the clothes one happened to be wearing.

Then again, it'd be a different story if she had a smartphone, but she's in primary school – and besides, I couldn't imagine those parents buying a phone for their children.

Running about town naked with only a spare key in the dead of night carries with it a great risk, though I can't say if she had sound judgement at the time – the initial moments after I was turned into a vampire was also marked by some mild disquiet.

'Streaking aside, how would she know where her older sister lives?'

'If she had a spare key with her, then wouldn't she have a memo of the address on hand too?…No, maybe she even memorised it and could rely on an internal map.'

Contradictions they may not be, but there are many additional small details that don't feel right (how would one explain the front tooth in the postbox?), but I'll leave it all for later – ultimately, if we get a hold of the person in question herself, then we wouldn't even need to sweat the small details.

Ononoki-chan is no longer stopping me – she probably realised that there's no point by this stage, and besides, if my instincts prove correct, then the nature of this case will be completely different.

The reason why I withdrew myself from any involvement last night was because, witnessing that tragic staircase landing, it was self-evident to me that the missing Benikujaku-chan was kidnapped – reporting and withdrawing was the promise I made in that instance.

But if the Impostor Benihibari I saw earlier today wasn't an inquisitive kidnapper, but the one who's always been perceived as a victim child, Benikujaku-chan, then this isn't a kidnapping at all – which means there is no evil kidnapper to be served by justice.

If it was the work of an oddity – if the 'Revolver' was real, then, ugh, how do I put it, it's…yes.

'It's up to us, then?'

It is so.

Whilst there's yet to be any concrete evidence, and nothing to disprove that the small girl's teeth wasn't the work of an evil criminal, if we find Impostor Benihibari in Beniguchi Hibari's flat, then we can put things to rest.

As well as ensuring her safety.

Come to think of it, that was my only goal – not to get to the bottom of things, not to solve some riddle, and of course, not to collect some supernatural tale.

I may have said that there's no need to sweat the small details once we meet her, but if she isn't willing, then I don't plan on asking her questions either.

Given it was an oddity that caused this explosive growth, as the Oddity Slayer, it's up to Oshino Shinobu to return things to where they were – like how she removed the Hindering Cat from Hanekawa Tsubasa via energy drain.

Though there are cases that would leave even an Oddity Slayer stumped, such as Kanbaru Suruga's left arm, I'm sure she would welcome a challenge.

'But say this I must: compared with mine appetite, the small girl's will in returning as a small girl would be the real question.'

'? I'm sure she wants to go back. She's obviously confused, and every move of hers looks like she doesn't know what she's doing.'

'Yet, as thou said, was it not her desire to grow into adulthood? Forsaking her home – as her elder sister did.'

'……'

'Bewildered she may now be, confounded as she may be, when she calmeth with time, mayhap she will deem it wiser not to revolve?… Just as I harbour no desire to return as Kissshot Acerolaorion Heartunderblade.'

Having been through thick and thin, the vampire decided to stick to being a young girl – conversely, would the small girl decide to

remain a grown-up?

This, too, is something that may only be answered by meeting her in person – perhaps even she wouldn't know.

027

Just like last night, Shinobu sat on the child seat, holding my smartphone and acting as my navigator, as we arrived outside the block of flats (I parked the car in the visitors' car park; we *are* visitors, in a broad sense), and just like last night, Ononoki-chan was there waiting for us by the entrance for humans, having left first by way of 'Unlimited Rulebook'. An entrance for humans it may be, it feels funny for us to walk through it…

And just like last night, Hachikuji remained in the shrine.

A god can't leave their town.

Right, and now for the differences: this is no quiet residential district, so whatever noise we make can be chalked up by the neighbours as 'uni kids messing about'.

The only thing is, this flat that Benihibari got her hands on doesn't look like it's built for students…if anything, it looks like it's for families…hmmm, I don't think her parents would fund her, so wouldn't she be barely making ends meet?

Perhaps she chose this flat out of her obsession with family – no, or maybe it's a reaction from Benihibari to choose a flat like this.

A flat fit for a family, huh.

Well, given that most of the tenants here are families, that spells good news for us – this is a good place to be.

If they live with their children, then a uni student with a blonde, gold-eyed young girl on his shoulder wouldn't look unnatural at all.

'I am definitely standing out…'

'Ononoki-chan, finished checking the place?'

'No, I didn't even go near it. I thought we were breaking and entering this time not to investigate, but to capture.'

‘Capture…’

‘Worst comes to worst, we could be neutralising our target. I want to minimise chances of failure – so instead of rehearsing, it’d be better if we do it in one fell swoop.’

Ononoki-chan revealed her specialist’s eyes – those dead eyes of hers remained expressionless, so they look the same, but her words gained a ferocious intensity.

She doesn’t look like she’s here for fun.

In this respect, she’s a completely different pro from me – fair enough, I’ve spent a long time with her as a plush in my home, so I may have become numb to that fact, but this corpse doll was basically created in order to vanquish oddities.

Created for the sake of vanquishing oddities.

It’s her entire concept.

Using Ononoki-chan as a convenient transportational tool can be considered a bad joke from Kagenui-san – once she enters her serious work mode, I’d be powerless to stop her.

Up until last night, she acted as support only as part of keeping watch on me, but now that an oddity is involved…

According to Shinobu, the ‘Revolver’ may not be an immortal oddity, but in the sense that it can twist forms of existence, it’s not that different from being immortal – to say it’s beyond Ononoki-chan’s expertise would be incorrect.

Well, since this wasn’t an order from Gaen-san, she probably wouldn’t act recklessly this time, but given she’s easily affected by her surroundings, I’m not sure how well this’ll go…

‘Breaking in would be an advantage for us, since Benikujaku would probably not have our raid in mind – like most people, in the face of something inexplicable, they’d think it can only happen to them. They’d think they’re special, and lapse into a bout of self-indulgence.’

Why do I feel like those words weren't directed against just one person…I felt stung for some reason.

The emotionless intonation did not help either.

'So if she happens to bump into you again, Mister Vampy, she'd never suspect you were vampiric – and she'd have no idea specialists like me even exist. Once we take advantage of that weakness, we can restrain her in no time.'

It might be too late for this, but maybe it's better if Ononoki-chan stayed with Hachikuji and guarded the shrine…I would personally do anything to avoid any violence.

I think this is something that can be solved via a long, candid chat.

One click on the intercom explaining that we're here to save her, and she'll open the door for us.

'It's never gone smoothly, has it? Didn't you get stapled in the mouth when you're trying to save a girl?'

Guess I did.

When I stretched a helping hand to Hachikuji, she also bit my hand in return – it's no strange occurrence at all.

Wanting to refuse help is a feeling everybody has to some extent, let alone when they're panicking.

When I met her in the day, panicked as she looked, I can tell she tried to keep a cool head…was she trying to get wind of how the search was going from me?

Was she trying to suss out how the Beniguchis are doing right now…? When she said her father was framing Benihibari, was it fact or was it merely something convenient to say?

'Welp, since you really want to, Mister Vampy, you can approach the flat from the front gate. Go ahead and ring the intercom as you like. I'll go in from the veranda – a pincer movement, basically.'

Right when Benikujaku-chan becomes alert to me through the fish-eye lens, she'll catch her fleeing on the veranda is probably what's running through Ononoki-chan's head.

Benihibari's address is Room 307, meaning it'd be on the second floor, though I guess if a man stood outside the door with a young girl on his shoulder, anybody would want to escape via the veranda no matter how high up they're living…

'Carry me not on thy shoulder when thou ringest the intercom, my master. Place me down.'

'Eureka! So there is a way!'

'There is no other way.'

'Then, Shinobu, wait for me in the passenger seat…'

'Art thy shoulder and the child seat the only two places I can choose to sit?'

As for Ononoki-chan's 'Unlimited Rulebook'…I don't think she needs it for the second floor; she can climb up just fine with an average grip, so this pincer manoeuvre should be nice and simple.

But I can also envision Benikujaku-chan trying to escape through the veranda, only to get hit by Ononoki-chan's 'Unlimited Rulebook'.

You may think she won't do that, but she really would.

A similar strategy was executed earlier, and she really went ahead and did that.

And even if I let Shinobu down from my shoulder, given that we already met in the cafeteria earlier, she could become instantly suspicious if she sees 'Araragi-san' knocking on her door.

Would it be better if it wasn't me, but Shinobu who pressed the intercom? Assume she's a nearby child making the rounds, delivering the circular notice.[19]

‘To have a blonde, gold-eyed young girl deliver, in the darkest of nights, circular notices, ’tis a horror tale in the making.’

My thoughts exactly.

We can anticipate Benikujaku-chan quietly waiting after responding to the intercom. That’d then rule out using the ‘Unlimited Rulebook’.

As for the excuse, that can be saying I ‘forgot something vital to the scene’, that I’m here to tell her – something like that.

I think it’s best to pretend I’m still under her little con…it’s moments like these that hit hard the fact that I’m not a detective, that I can’t coolly lay out the facts in front of her.

Just pretend I’m an imbecile.

I’ll say this for the record, I’m great at it.

I may be in uni, but that doesn’t mean I’m wise – just as people may be adults, but that doesn’t mean they’re free.

028

The heights that is ‘Arrangement Flower Manase’ (which sounds less like a residential project and more like a florist) doesn’t have an electronic lock system, so we were able to make our way to Room 307, where Beniguchi Hibari currently resides, fairly easily – in the end, Shinobu returned inside my shadow.

Eh, anybody in their right mind would choose that. Even if they’re an imbecile.

I don’t think there’s any use in shilly-shallying, so I pressed the intercom button as soon as I got there – after having confirmed there’s nobody else on the same floor, and that there aren’t any security cameras installed on any of the other rooms.

The decision to engage the intercom without hesitation was in consideration of Benikujaku-chan, who might be able to escape Ononoki-chan’s ambush if I do things quickly enough.

‘Riiight～ Coming, please wait, please～’

The voice didn’t come from the intercom, but from directly behind the door – an overly polite tone, followed immediately by the door opening.

Of course, I knew as soon as I heard that voice – it was Ononoki-chan waiting on the other side of the door.

‘I even pretended to sound like her. Y’know, her “please”es.’

‘Don’t pretend to sound like her. Even her “please”es.’

Benikujaku-chan’s manner of speech was something I brought up back in the Kitashirahebi Shrine…it was refreshing to hear Ononoki-chan to not speak casually like she usually does, but before we even get to that –

Eh?

Why is Ononoki-chan here?

‘I did say I’m coming in from the veranda, right? I climbed in through the window and had a quick look inside, so I was able to answer Mister Vampy calling from the intercom.’

That was too quick.

She didn’t wait for me at all.

Could she have completely seen through my moment of leniency in trying to let her go…? I really don’t stand a chance against anybody here.

Especially against the pro that is Ononoki-chan.

Ononoki-pro, she is.

Mm…if she’s had a quick look around, that means she can have a quick look around; is Benikujaku-chan not here?

I asked her, fervently hoping it’d be a yes.

‘Mm hmm. Just like the emergency stairwell in the multi-storey car park, Transistor Slender’s made her escape from her safe house.’

Ononoki-chan responded.

‘Come on in, this way. Not that there’s anything much.’

‘You want me in…I can’t, since neither tenant nor her sister are here. I’m a vampire, you see.’

‘Don’t become a good vampire all of a sudden. Look, I don’t want any of the neighbours witnessing some stranger talking to a tween girl through the door.’

‘I’ll grant you, this time of day, it’s real easy for the neighbours to see a guy talking to a tween girl…’

‘It’s the “through the door” part I want you to pay attention to. Looks like you’re ready.’

Ononoki-chan said, as she yanked me into the flat, closed the door, and locked it.

Gauging my readiness by telling me a loli joke makes me feel difficult…dammit, now I'm an accomplice in breaking and entering.

Wait, no, the primary offender?

Even though Ononoki-chan's in full control, the one who masterminded this scheme was none other than me.

Ononoki-chan is, in the end, a doll, a tool, so it'll be me who answers 'yes' to 'did you do it?', even if 'it' was pulverising an oddity-possessed small girl.

'Shouldn't the window be locked?'

'I broke it. Get the queen seductress to mend it later.'

'……'

I don't want Shinobu's materialisation powers to be used in a cover-up – maybe it's better if Ononoki-chan and I don't split up tonight.

'Look, Mister Vampy.'

Ignoring my inner thoughts, Ononoki-chan led me from the front door to the living room, and pointed inside – the lights weren't on, since both of us had excellent night vision, as both of us trespassed inside.

The window was indeed broken.

I was prepared to see both the window and the window frame smashed with her 'Unlimited Rulebook', but as it turns out, the damage is minimal, with only a few square centimetres affected near the crescent lock…which gave me a sigh of relief, but on the other hand, isn't this exactly a burglar's technique?

We'll set that aside for now.

What's more important is the interior – when Ononoki-chan said

‘not that there’s anything much’, she really wasn’t trying to be polite about it.

Not that there’s any purpose to being polite about someone else’s place. Whilst ‘completely empty’ doesn’t describe the living room, it’s pretty close.

It’s an overwhelming emptiness.

It’d make some sense if she just moved in, but the more undeniable possibility was that the apple didn’t fall far from the tree, and I don’t know what to say to that.

But it wasn’t the ‘nothing’ that Ononoki-chan wanted me to see, it’s the carelessly-thrown recruit suit in the centre of the living room – no, not a recruit suit, the fresher’s suit worn in the entrance ceremony.

It was not broken.

It looked like it was taken off normally, then thrown away.

Let alone folded, it wasn’t even in one piece, as if the parents haven’t taught the kid any manners when it comes to clothing… manners, huh.

‘Manners made mandatory may make misery, so not everybody’s cut out for it – but then, given *this* family…’

Ononoki-chan said.

And waved me towards the bathroom.

Having met her earlier today – no, I didn’t even meet her today, she’s just a senpai from middle school of a teammate of a junior, and now I’m already in a uni girl’s home; this is a completely different level compared to playing with a young girl, little girl, or a tween girl – a completely different level of pervertedness, that is.

But at least this time, unlike my failings at the emergency staircase, I rolled down my sleeves to act as gloves and stepped in…

Don't tell me the older sister's corpse is waiting for me in the bathroom? That'd really make it the beginning of a horror film –

Having set myself up for that, I am once again relieved to not see a naked, dead uni girl in the bathtub – but there seems to be something untoward.

It's the hair.

Giant clumps of hair slunk down the bathing area – and as expected, the space where you'd see soap and shampoo has been replaced with a pair of scissors.

Not shears, desk scissors – the type of scissors Senjougahara Hitagi once used wrongly, though I can't say it was used correctly here either.

Though not as eerie as teeth on the floor, this is a plentifully eerie sight…if someone saw this without context, they'd think this was a crime scene.

But consider approaching it as an oddity scene.

This is the long hair that was on Impostor Benihibari when I met her today – well, I can't say for sure it's her hair, I'm no forensic scientist, but I'm quite certain.

So after Impostor Benihibari met me, she went back to this flat, took her suit off, and cut her hair.

I guess despite being a small girl inside, she still takes these things into account – not despite, because. She probably saw how I reacted to her in the cafeteria and decided she didn't 'look like an adult'. She may have deflected it adroitly in our conversation, but she found out wearing a suit wasn't quite right…and as for the trimmed hair, could she have thought I would tail her? Could she have decided to do a big makeover after she took the suit off? Or maybe she cut off the hair that grew over the course of one night because it hindered her escaping…escaping?

Where would she escape?

And why would she?

‘Ononoki-chan – eh?’

Ononoki-chan vanished from the bathroom whilst I wasn’t noticing…not that I wanted to jump in the bath with her, but it is a bit discomforting.

The regret from invading the territory of someone I never met is making me even more timid than usual.

‘Here.’

My eyes darted toward where the voice came from, which was next to the living room…the study?

‘Looks like a room you study in. There’s also a bedroom. Which means this flat’s a 2LDK – two rooms plus a living, dining, and kitchen area. Quite roomy for a single person…maybe she wanted to live in a big space because she didn’t have any back home, or maybe she wants her younger sister living with her in the future. Either way, right now it’s a spartan 2LDK flat.’

Ononoki-chan analysed.

As for me, I’m surprised that there can be a separate room for studying – so aspirational uni students can rearrange their own living space like this.

Well, like the living room, there isn’t much to be found here, so it is indeed spartan, but on the bookshelf that’s integrated with the office desk are specialised books I’ll never get to read in my lifetime – there’s even books in foreign languages.

Seems like she doesn’t need a translator to have fun in Australia with her friends; no, it might not be a sightseeing trip, maybe she began her voyage like a working holiday?

Isn’t it just rotten luck – to have gone through all this in preparation to welcome her younger sister, only for her to be away when she came knocking?

‘Sorry, Ononoki-chan, I can’t see myself entering the bedroom.’

‘I don’t see any point in drawing that kind of line right now, but go on, call yourself a gentleman all you like. A gentleman thief.’

Has my Sherlock Holmes gambit accidentally turned into an Arsène Lupin gambit?

‘Don’t worry, I’ve checked the bedroom in advance. There’s only a futon. Oh, and also pyjamas and underwear scattered on it.’

I didn’t need that information.

No, actually, it might not be unnecessary – it reminds me of how the suit was scattered all over the living room; I guess those two stepsisters do have something bringing them together.

– I wonder where Hanekawa’s sleeping right now?

Surely not the corridor, I thought to myself…

Frankly, even with a gagging order in place, I did consider phoning Hanekawa and asking for her opinion…as someone with experience living through that, I’m sure she has some useful, targeted advice.

Even if I didn’t, I wonder if Hanekawa would instantly categorise this as the work of oddities after hearing what Higasa-chan initially had to say.

A ‘Revolver’.

‘I think you’d be giving her too much credit…in snail terms, it’s like you’re shelling out too much for her, or like placing too much cargo on an escargot.’

‘The hell’s that even supposed to mean?’

‘Hanekawa Tsubasa ain’t Mary freakin’ Sue, ain’t she? I reckon Mister Vampy’s more suited for this case, since you know what failure is.’

‘……’

‘With Hanekawa Tsubasa only knowing what she knows, presumably she’d only talk sense to the Beniguchi sisters – that aside, I wasn’t trying to draw your attention to the knickers in the bedroom, but this –’

Ononoki-chan pointed towards the PC on the desk – a laptop so thin I had to make sure it wasn’t a sheet of paper.

‘What about the laptop? This isn’t Benikujaku-chan’s, but Benihibari’s, right?’

‘It could be that Transistor Slender used the computer to look for a new place to hide – so I had a go leafing through any records.’

How thorough…I see, so even if the older sister she’s looking for isn’t there, as long as there’s some way of accessing the internet… for a smartphone-less (presumably) Benikujaku-chan, this item really would be a life saver.

Actually, no, the thing that helped her out the most would be the clothes.

Suits and all else…from what I’ve heard about the bedroom, she’s definitely not short of underwear…with her hair cut off, I wonder where she’s going, in what guise?

‘I don’t have a computer myself, so I can’t say for sure, but don’t those things usually have passwords on them?’

‘There is. But I’ve cracked it.’

‘Holy shit!’

Cracking passwords like how you cracked the window? Are you sure you’re an ancient monstrous *tsukumogami* and not a cutting-edge hacker?

‘Oh no no no, I’m crap at computers too. I said it, didn’t I? As a tool myself, using tools is difficult for me – but there is a premise here. If this computer was used to aid her escape, then the password must be something even the little sister knows.’

‘Ohhh…so something like the little sister’s name or her birthday?’

‘The real answer’s neither. I’ve already tried them, but both were wrong. Having got it wrong twice, if I got it wrong a third time, the computer’s security protocol would activate and format all its data.’

Must be real risky.

To just do this to another person’s computer.

But, now that it’s cracked –

‘Could it be “Benikujaku”?’

The moment I said it, I knew I was wrong – ‘Benikujaku’ is a nickname coined by Higasa-chan, and Higasa-chan has never been in contact with Benihibari herself.

‘So close, Mister Vampy.’

‘Hm?’

‘The password is “Benishouga”.’

Benishouga.

The nickname Impostor Benihibari accidentally let slip during our rendezvous at the cafeteria – *her own nickname*.

029

Setting aside the thought of the older sister using a nickname her younger sister didn't much like as her password…having checked her browser history, Ononoki-chan said she's sorry to report she couldn't find where she was headed.

'Hm? So that means Benikujaku-chan didn't use the laptop after all?'

'No, there are signs that she did. First, she wanted to know what was happening to her – she wanted to find a name for her symptoms, and searched the web for answers.'

Yeah, that makes sense.

Compared to looking for a new hideout, this would've been more urgent – having grown ten years overnight, the first conclusion one jumps to probably wouldn't be 'it's oddities!'.

It's not a conclusion one'd crawl to, either.

'That's right. However, she doesn't seem to have the best of luck when it comes to web searches, including looking for the next hideout…even for someone who's as bad at computers as I am, I could tell she doesn't know how to search.'

'Doesn't know how to search?'

'The first thing she put in was "puberty adults teeth".'

You wouldn't get what you're looking for with that…'teeth' isn't necessary here.

'She then searched for "puberty breasts".'

'That'd give you something very different.'

The older sister's in for quite a shock once she returns to Japan and sees her own browsing history.

‘And as for looking for an escape, she also searched with “map escape plan please please”.’

She’d be better off if she just went with ‘map’.

‘Escape plan’ wouldn’t help, and what was she thinking with ‘please please’…what, will Lord Computer grant you better results if you went pretty please?

Although I shouldn’t make fun of her.

I can also feel how serious she must’ve been, though it’s probably something bound to happen – whilst it’s practically impossible for a primary school kid to not have used a computer these days, given what this family’s like, she’s probably about as competent in front of the keyboard as Kanbaru is in front of a smartphone’s camera app.

Is that what happens if one is unfamiliar with a search engine… then again, there are things we can gleam from this search history.

It seems Benikujaku-chan was indeed stupefied by the changes in her body, and wanted a way to escape – the reason why she didn’t stay here for long must’ve been because she thought I was suspicious of her.

Well, I *was* suspicious of her, so…

‘True. At the very least, it is conclusive proof that the “Recruit Suit-san” Mister Vampy saw at daytime was indeed Transistor Slender. Actually, although this wasn’t exactly the recruit suit…she did search for ‘adults fashion’ too. Hence reaching the slightly off conclusion of women appearing in suits. Aside from that, she had also typed in “somebody help me”, “god please help me”, and “somebody anybody save me please”. Such pointlessly fruitless searches she repeated over and over, probably I’d say for about two hours.’

Ononoki-chan said.

‘But it does beg the question of how, with such search skills, little Transistor Slender managed to know of Mister Vampy’s existence.

There's no way she'd manage to reverse engineer the five circles like you've said, right? Nor would she get hold of Mitonon either.'

'Mitonon' seems to be catching on.

Even though it's a weird nickname I'm not even sure if Higasa-chan uses all the time…yeah, that makes sense; Beniguchi Hibari can know of my existence the same way I knew of hers, but it'd be impossible for Benikujaku-chan.

The reason why she can disguise as her older sister is because, in the end, I've never ever seen Benihibari. And she would've been found out if she contacted Mitonon –

'Ononoki-chan, have you checked her messages in addition to her browsing history?'

'Eh? No, I haven't. I wouldn't step into something so private.'

Says the one who just broke into the flat *and* the computer…

'You could probably find her contacting Mitonon in the chat logs… and the logs between her and her father…she probably saw the whole conversation unfold between her father in Japan and her older sister in Australia via this computer.'

That's how she found out her father's suspecting her older sister – and of who first found the scene she made in the staircase landing.

And that it turned from a missing persons case to a kidnapping case.

'Er…I don't know anything about this…but aren't all your messages synced between computer and smartphone?'

If I could have someone joining our investigatory team right now, I would want it not to be Hanekawa Tsubasa, but an IT department – if someone knowledgeable overheard how these two troglodytes talk about technological thingamajigs, I'm sure it'll only end in much guffawing.

The last people I want to know about our dismal, primary-school level digital literacy were the smooth texters Mitonon and Higasa-

chan – but on the other hand, if *I* could figure it out, that means even a primary school kid could figure it out.

'Okay, I'll take a closer look. Mister Vampy, look away for a second. No peeking at a uni girl's messages, Mister Vampy.'

'Why the sudden moral shift? Besides, Ononoki-chan, how is it okay for you to read them?'

'I am a doll, an AI-like existence. Think of it as an antivirus scanning the mailbox.'

Alright, alright, whatever you say.

Turning backwards, I collected my thoughts.

Why would she come to me at university specifically?

It's clearly a high-risk move – in fact, it's exactly what blew her cover – yet she carried that risk just to ask me about how the scene was when I found it; was it because she thought her older sister was a suspect?

Ah…so that's why she escaped from this flat.

Even with something different troubling her, if we were to simply look at the facts, it's indisputable that a missing girl is hiding in her stepsister's place, where she is living alone; even if it didn't turn into a kidnapping, it still wouldn't be extraordinary to think that staying here long would eventually trouble her older sister.

It wouldn't only make her worry, it'd cause trouble for her, hence the younger sister feeling sorry and getting out of this 'hideout' – if this hunch is correct, then everything up until now has been Benikujaku-chan's solo act; then again, as someone who hid in the gym storage room after a hysteric fit, I understand how she feels.

One's vision isn't something you can expand willy-nilly – even if one perceives oneself as calm, or thinks of oneself as being capable in a pinch, there will be times when one is thrust into an untenable position.

If I could catch Benikujaku-chan using the computer in this room, I'd advise her to 'just tell everything to her sister'; but this really is 'something I can't do'.

Furthermore, I haven't mentioned anything about oddities to her family – the only time I'd say anything about oddities is if I knew the person in front of me through oddities.

I hope Benikujaku-chan could confide in me in the same way, but I failed to notice it during the daytime – it's becoming one of my deepest regrets.

There wasn't a need to ask Higasa-chan for her photograph; the clues were plenty obvious even back then.

'Somebody help me', 'god please help me', and 'somebody anybody save me please'…

What results would that give?

If she somehow got in touch with a ghost-buster like Kaiki, then what kind of trouble is she getting mired in –

'I've finished looking through. No conversations from Transistor Slender to either Mitonon or the older sister.'

Ononoki-chan gave her findings from behind me. So I was wrong in guessing she messaged somebody?

'No, Mister Vampy's theory was worthy of a bingo. What I meant just now was she didn't need to put on an act; *the older sister herself* had messaged Mitonon about it – whilst they're probably not close enough to add each other on LINE, she did ask her about "the first witness" that is "Araragi Koyomi".'

Oh.

I'm caught out by my name appearing all of a sudden…but I see what it is now.

'Then, what followed was a lengthy exchange between the older sister and her father…it just went on forever. Eh, it's always like

that when it comes to authors' correspondences; things turn sour more easily when it's put to print.'

The same thing happened between Higasa-chan and Mitonon, didn't it…

No, it'd have happened even if they were on the phone…and it's more than the practical issue of international calls costing a fortune – the messages are evidence that Benihibari's relationship with her parents is such that they couldn't talk over the phone.

In the end, Benikujaku-chan sadly knew something she needn't have known – then again, it'd be harsh to place blame on her reading her older sister's private chat logs too.

As far as I can tell, this empty 2LDK flat doesn't have a phone installed, so maybe she was trying to compose a message just to reach out for help – something that failed as miserably as her searches on the web.

Worse still, she found out something she wasn't supposed to…call it a malaise of the information age, but now Benikujaku-chan not only has to look after herself, but the older sister she's depending on.

Even though it's the last thing she should be overthinking right now…

'A malaise, huh. Well, not that it can be allayed with a simple *allez!*'

'I can't believe you can still find jokes to crack at this point.'

'Then I shall stop cracking jokes and get cracking. The reasons Transistor Slender went to see Mister Vampy, that is, everything that happened up until now, has been known. Yet there are no leads from this computer regarding the present and the near future.'

Ononoki-chan said as she shut down the laptop – both power and lid.

'With zero leads, then we can only guess with what we have…so right now, Benikujaku-chan's wandering aimlessly around town at night, right? If she's looking for places to go, that means she can't

decide on a place.'

Not a good piece of intel.

No part of 'wandering aimlessly around town at night' would lift any spirits up – if it's a song lyric, that song's a ballad.

But since we're completely outside the school district, that is, a completely unfamiliar residential, or should I say, student residential district, and since she doesn't know anybody around here she can rely on, doesn't that mean she'd find somewhere temporary for shelter?

A karaoke bar, or a manga café, or a capsule hotel – she must have some cash with her…the way she sneaked into university shows that she may not be great at the internet, but she's got initiative.

'She looks like she's at least eighteen, and in some angles she even looks like a fourth year; that means we can count out nooks and crannies in our search now, right?'

'But wouldn't she still have the flexible imagination of a year five schoolgirl? Maybe she'll spend the night in the gutter.'

'Hmmm…'

Much as it's an image I don't want to see, it's not impossible… karaoke bars, manga cafés, capsule hotels, or twenty-four-hour family restaurants, bowling alleys…it's difficult to tell if a year five schoolkid knows of these 'typical temporary shelters'.

'And since she's got some cash, that means she can travel, no? Who's to say she's still nearby? Maybe she's already booked a budget flight to Australia.'

'Not without a passport she can't…'

'You never know. She could be a stowaway.'

I don't think stowaways happen that often though…having said that, whilst I can't imagine her on her way to Australia, I could imagine her not being around here.

Which does depend on how much escape money she has, but I can easily imagine her staying away from the flat out of not wanting to give her older sister more trouble…but if that's what she's thinking, she would've tidied up the living room and the bathroom first, to get rid of evidence…if that's what she did, we could've caught her in time.

Maybe we could've saved her.

No matter what she wants herself – no matter if she wants to remain an adult, no matter if she doesn't want to be a child.

Fuck, I'm the one who needs saving – I'm the one who's trapped, with nowhere to go. Even if I ask Gaen-san now, there's no guarantee she'll take action –

Someone help me – god help me – somebody, anybody, help me, please –

God?

'Uh, Ononoki-chan. Could she be headed to a shrine?'

'A shrine?'

'Shrines are something even kids would know about, right? Festivals are held there; you'd go there to pray when things go wrong; besides, she definitely has enough money on her to make an offering.'

'That's not a bad idea, but there's tons of shrines, right? Never mind finding which one, we've only just now been – ah.'

'Exactly. She might not have found it on the internet, but the shrine we were in up until recently – it's a shrine that worships a god of lost children. It's a very rare type of shrine.'

A shrine that worships the snail that only children unwilling to return home, children who are lost can see – the Kitashirahebi Shrine.

A new god.

‘If she’s wandering aimlessly around town at night, then wouldn’t the end goal of this young girl who’s left home be Hachikuji Mayoi?’

The search has gone back to where it started.

Like tracing a spiral – a vortex.

030

I have always thought, that everything that has happened to me has been normal.

That the reason why we did not have much was because we were ‘pour’, that that was why. So, when I was growing up, I wanted to make lots of money when I grew up, to make mummy live a happier life. Mummy was the one who raised me, so I wanted to repay her. That was the dream I had. I had that sort of dream.

But, however, it was wrong.

My family does not lack money, but affection; that was what was missing. Mummy was not trying her hardest to raise me, that was not the case. She spends all her time outside the house, eating delicious food, having fun with everybody, meeting and playing with her friends; she did this almost every day.

She always comes home late, but it was not because she had overtime, but because she was having ‘corses’ at a restaurant. Sometimes she would not come home at all, but not because she had work all night, but because she was drinking wine as if it were water.

When mummy is tired, she goes and sleeps inside a hotel. Not home, but a hotel. For my mummy, home is not a place she can take a rest in.

When I have many things, it results in something called ‘opsesshun’, that was what she had taught me before.

The world’s gone to stuff, hasn’t it?

See, look at the telly.

Oh, there isn’t one. Out of sight, out of mind.

Everybody can’t let go of their phones for one second. See, that’s what obsession is. If nobody had phones, then everybody would be

free. Don't you think?

You don't? Makes sense, you don't have one after all.

This is what freedom is like.

I don't want to tie you down, Kujaku-chan.

When I'm on the train, all I see is people playing around with their phones. A truly senseless sight. What happened to the people who'd read books? Hm? Aren't people who read books obsessed too?

Don't interrupt me.

You're making mum sad.

I only have two clothes, because I am supposed to be free. I do not need to think about rotating my clothes. Because I have no pyjamas, I wear nothing when I go to sleep. This makes it the greatest freedom.

I have one pencil. The only rubber I have is on the other end, the other end of the pencil. I have the one notebook for every class I take. Originally, mummy wanted me to wear one pair of shoes rather than to have outdoor and indoor shoes, but my teacher said no to that.

Your teacher's a sad human being, imprisoned by traditions of old. Don't you grow up to become so unfree.

So she said to me.

Then, with such freedom, what kind of grown-up will I grow up to be?

For mummy to be so unopsessed, she might be giving it her all to save up.

But the home looks completely empty, and there is nothing inside.

Our bathroom has only a bar of soap in it. We wash our hair with it, even though it makes our hair all dry and rough. I did not know

what shampoo was until I was in year three I knew. I still have little clue what a rinse is. Do you know what the difference is between a rinse and a conditioner?

When my hair, my dry and rough hair, when it grows, my mummy cuts it for me with a pair of scissors. The same pair of scissors she cut her envelopes open with just now. It takes a minute for her to finish cutting my hair.

I do not have a toothbrush. Mouthwash is enough, according to the books. But then I had a cavity. It hurt so much, but mummy said it will be fine, it's only a milk tooth, so it does not matter if I do not get treatment.

It hurts going to the dentist's, you don't like it, do you? Mum doesn't want to saddle you with bad memories.

So I left the tooth alone. The pain went away over time. But I have always felt something else was paining me.

I have always thought, that everything that has happened to me has been normal.

031

It was my older sister, Hibari, who told me that none of this was normal.

My dad's not normal, so he remarried with your abnormal mum, Kujaku-chan. My family – our family, it's hopeless. We're gonna grow up as soon as we can, and get out of this place.

Become adults, fast as we can.

And get outta this house.

That was all my sister, Hibari, said over and over again. It was like reciting a curse – a curse that was born from her heart.

But if big sis did not tell me any of it, I would have noticed that something was not normal by myself.

The thing mummy was not opsessed by was not things, but her own family and her own daughter.

Like how ice would melt into nothing.

That if she left things alone, her own daughter would go away, that was what mummy thought.

My new father told me this.

I cannot simply call him father.

Your dad is the only dad in the world, and you shouldn't forget about him. You have to treasure your real dad dearly. You don't need a new father to replace him. Think of me as an uncle living together with you.

I have no idea who my real father is. I asked mummy, but she never told me.

I can't believe I have a daughter who asks me questions like this. Woe is me! I'm a truly miserable mother. She would say these

words, and then she would start to cry.

Therefore, when someone mentions something about real fathers, for me, I have no clue as to what they are talking about. All I can be certain of is that this person does not want and has no desire to be my father at all.

He is an uncle, living together with us, he is.

But Hibari, she wanted to be an older sister to me, that was what she wanted to be.

My older sister.

She gave me pyjamas, she gave me a rubber, she taught me what shampoo is, she brushed my hair with something called a comb, she took me to the dentist. She had also given me a doll at some point, but mummy threw it away when she found out.

Later, I pretended to fall out with big sis in front of mummy and uncle who lives with us. To lie in front of grown-ups made me feel like a grown-up myself, and my heart was racing every time I lied to them about falling out with my sister.

Big sis Hibari helped me with studying too. Before that, I was not allowed to study for tests, because tests and examinations stopped me from a free imagination, but my big sister, she said to me that such a ban would only rob me of my ability to live alone. I hated studying. But, when my big sis started studying with me, I grew to like it over time.

Mummy later married the uncle who has been living with us (even though she always said marriage is an opsesshun too), because the uncle who has been living together with us is very rich (the uncle who has been living with us married mummy because mummy is pretty. I forgot to say that my mummy is a very beautiful woman).

But even with more money, the house did not end up with more things, and mummy only returned home even less than she did. The uncle who has been living with us did not feel like he was living with us as time passed. He became an uncle who stayed home from

time to time. Sometimes, he would invite his friends from work, and he would call these friends his ‘family’. He would invite them over and drink with them in the living room. When that happens, he would throw myself and my big sis out.

I have big sis Hibari to take care of me. That is why unlike mummy, I never thought my life was miserable. It would be the opposite. I think that I am happy, and that the life I lead is a happy one. Being together with Hibari, it was fun when we were trying to live together. I felt happy when I am with my big sis.

However.

I did not think that was normal – I know full well that those days will come to an end.

032

When Hibari turned eighteen, when she finished high school, she left our home. My big sis became a student at university.

Her wish had finally come true to her.

Don't be obsessed. Don't hesitate in letting go. Because, Kujaku-chan, the more you obsess over something, the harder it is to let it go. You have to think it's fine – you have to grow, become an adult.

In the end, perhaps mummy's words were right all along. When I had to say goodbye to sis, it felt like my heart was being cut into pieces. I even wondered why blood did not flow out from my body.

I'm sorry. I – your sister – I betrayed you.

Leaving you here, alone – it's not what I wanted, and it's not what I imagined. All I wanted was to rid myself of that kind of father. I've waited, carried this feeling with me for so long – and this is how it ends.

I originally wanted to take you with me; I really wanted to take you with me, but – if I did that, it'd be a crime. I'd have kidnapped you. I may be your sister, but I'm only your stepsister.

I thought of her as my blood sister, that was what I ended up thinking.

All I can wish for is for you to grow up soon, and leave home the first instance you can. If you run into trouble, lemme know. Here's my spare key. Let's keep it a sisters' secret, shall we, Benishouga-chan?

I do not like being called 'Benishouga-chan' (to let my older sister know my nickname from primary school is my biggest mistake. I am still a Beniguchi to myself). However, I really like this secret I have with Hibari. I taped my sister's address onto the spare key, and I kept it with me wherever I went. I did not let it go away from me, even when I am in the bath, I kept it with me.

I do not think the life I have led is one that should be pitied upon. But I do think that the life my big sis has led is worth pitying.

It is because she has a younger sister that my big sis Hibari still cannot be completely glad about herself, even though she has already reached her goal of 'leaving home when she becomes eighteen', I can still see that she is not happy.

It was because of my opsesshun with my big sis that our goodbye hurt that much more, and it was also Hibari's opsesshun with me that stopped her from being able to live the happy life she was supposed to live.

Is opsesshun really an enemy?

Is my mother just?

And then, my life had returned, back to normal.

The house was empty once more.

Big sis Hibari was no longer there to care for me, so I had to start taking care of myself for myself.

Life isn't that important, Kujaku-chan – if you obsess over it, you'd only become an inferior person. It's okay if you don't care for yourself. Mum wants you to live life your own way, and I want you to end life your own way. If you seek death, then you can die any time you want.

These words I hear a lot from both mummy and uncle who lives with us (but does not live with us), day after day, night after night, they said the same kind of thing to me.

If you seek death, then you can die any time you want.

It is a thought that made me feel relieved. But, I also feel deep down that doing that would also be a big no-no.

Just as I settled down to this everyday life, and as I began to get used to it – or, maybe, it was when I was about to give up on it –

One day, while I was walking on my way back from school.

I met a snail.

It was raining that day. The umbrella my sister bought for me was thrown away by mummy, so I was wet all over, and I was trying to go home walking under as many awnings as I could find.

I do not like it when my shoes get wet, so when it is raining, I would put them in a plastic bag and put it in my backpack, and I would go home bare-footed.

There was a question in a test that goes, 'would you end up covered in less rain if you ran instead of walked'. Or, I think there was a question like that, in a test, but I did not run. I walked back home lazily, as I usually would.

I walked from school back to home.

It took me three hours to walk back home.

Normally, if I walked, I would make my way back home within fifteen minutes, but ever since saying goodbye with sis, if I can, I want to spend as much of my time away from home as I can, even for just one more second, so I walked home really, really slowly – when I go to school, I would do the opposite, I would dash and run there.

This 'techniik', of adjusting my pace, must have been my first invention, and I felt very excited – taking my time, one step after the other.

Yes, that would be it.

I walked at a snail's pace.

Step by step, I made my way home – because I did not want to go back home, when I saw the puddles on the tarmac, I thought there was no need to avoid them, since I was already soaked, so I stepped my bare feet into the puddles, but then I heard something that was not a splash of water, and it did not feel like water either.

Then, I felt hurt, like I was stabbed by something. I started thinking it could have been a shard of glass in the water, and I became really nervous – I was nervous because big sis was no longer there to take me to the hospital.

But it was not a shard of glass that had stabbed me.

The thing that had stabbed me was shell-like.

Shell-like – a shell.

No, it may have been a shell, but it was not empty – because inside that shell, there was a snail inside that shell.

When I was slowly making my way back home, I stepped on and crushed Mister Snail living in the puddle.

033

The first one that came off was a front tooth. It just dropped out. I think it was on the upper row, the second one from right. From my right. But then, not long after that, the second from left upper tooth fell out as well, so maybe it makes little difference.

I was very happy at first. Mummy said milk teeth grow out, so I did not need to go to the dentist for a cavity, but up until now, I have never had a tooth fall out before. Out of all the students in year five, I was the only one who has never had any teeth replaced. My PE teacher said that it was 'raer' for anybody my age to have never had a tooth replaced, but it was no big deal.

However, big sis became very worried. She said it might have been because I did not have enough nutrition. Seeing big sis acting like this, I started to become afraid. I was afraid that I could not grow up into a grown-up after all.

So I was really happy to have lost my first tooth. I thought it came out from the shock of having stepped on Mister Snail. It was half-pity, half-sick for me.

But in no time, I no longer felt either of those feelings. It was not only the other front teeth, but all my other teeth that fell into the water. I was very scared, and I picked up all the teeth that fell out, and tried to put them back in, like they were only a while ago. However, I did not succeed in putting every tooth back where it was, because I had no idea which tooth went where.

I became totally frightened.

I thought it must have been because I stepped on Mister Snail, that I was being punished. Even though my gums did not hurt, the rest of my body started to ache.

Thinking back on it now, it must have been the 'growth pains' my class has been talking about – but back then, I thought I was being punished by the gods.

It felt like I was being punched all over my body. It was so painful I cannot stay quiet, so I ran and ran and ran – even though just then, I had been challenging myself on how slow I can walk, but now in the rain, I started running.

However, even as I ran, it did not feel any better. It was too painful, I cannot stand it.

I really thought I would rather die.

I want to die, I thought to myself.

So I looked for somewhere high up – somewhere high up enough that I can jump to my death. Mummy taught me that before.

If I seek death, then so be it.

I first thought of the school campus, but I ran in the opposite way. If I turned back and ran back where I came from, I think it would be a mad thing to do – and then I heard a 'squeak' sound.

Thinking back on it later, it must have been my clothes cracking open. It could also be the sound of the shoulder straps of my backpack eating into my shoulders.

I saw a car park. The car park was a two-storey car park. It did not look tall enough for me to die if I jumped off it, but I decided to give it a try.

I could not wait for the lift, and since it was so painful, I rushed up the emergency stairs.

If I jump from the roof, I would be happy. I could be free from this pain that seems to be hurting from the outside and the inside.

I can be liberated. If I let go of my life.

But, by the time I went up, I was exhausted. I fell down just before I made it to the roof. The backpack ate its way into my body so much that it was twisting my body – wringing it, trying to snap it like a twig, and it was very difficult getting it off. All of the teeth I had picked up was now all over the floor.

Suddenly, I could not see anything.

I thought it was because I had fainted, but I found out it was because when I was down on the ground, I had a metre of forelocks in front of my face.

034

By the time I had found out, I had already become a grown-up. I have always been told to grow up faster, and I have always wanted to grow up faster, and now I really am a grown-up.

At first, I thought I had travelled through time. I thought I had slept on the stairs for ten years – but then, I remembered everything that had happened last night.

The pain in my body had gone away. It had left me.

All my teeth had grew back – even teeth I never had before, in the deepest place inside my mouth, one each in my upper right, lower right, upper left, and lower left.

These teeth must be the wisdom teeth I had heard from other people.

I do not have a mirror, so I checked my face with the metal parts of my backpack…I look grown-up. I look about the same age as my big sis.

My head felt heavy, and I only realised that my hair has also grown out. My chest was heavier, and I wondered what these things are… other than that, there were other parts of my body that had changed in addition to what I said.

It makes me think of that class in school where only the girls went. I thought it had nothing to do with me, because I had not even had a milk tooth replaced, but then, suddenly, I had passed everybody in that class.

I am now an eighteen-year-old woman, just like my big sis.

I can leave home now.

I thought god must have made my wish come true. I thought, perhaps, the Mister Snail I had stepped on was a god.

I thought I would be punished by god after I had stepped on it – but, somehow, it looked like I was rewarded.

I do not know what goes on inside the head of gods.

But now, I can leave home now.

I can go to where Hibari is.

I can live together with my big sis at long last.

When I threw away the backpack because of the pain, everything that was in the backpack had scattered all over the place, but I then found the spare key after a short moment.

The memo sticker with the address taped onto the key was still there, and I knew it was in a block of flats. The address was in a building called 'Arrangement Flower Manase', and the room number was number 307.

I thought of going there right away, but then I thought it would be better if I went there at night.

I may not know much, but I know that without any pieces of clothing, now that I am eighteen, if I went to big sis's home in the day, it would be a bad thing.

I am already a grown-up.

I should pay attention to how I act around other people.

Big sis Hibari has classes too, so it would be better to wait until night came. If I stayed here, I do not think anybody would come here.

Anyway, the bed was solid, and it was noisy, so it was not a comfortable place to hide – but it is still more comfortable than the house.

This was my first sleepover.

I think I understand how mummy feels now.

I can sleep better when I am not at home.

035

I put a front tooth in the post outside the house before I went to where big sis Hibari lives. If you ask me if I was making a little prank, I would say no.

It was not a prank. It was for mummy, and for the uncle who lives with us – the uncle who lived, then stopped living with us, it was an act for revenge.

I am admitting it.

I am no longer an innocent little child.

I made a decision to move out as soon as I became a grown-up, and similarly, I made a decision to take revenge on that kind of people when I become a grown-up.

I am not like big sis Hibari. I think big sis would think she has a father who believes in her, even if she had already left home.

If somebody were to see the human tooth in the post, they would be frightened. Because it would be like getting bitten when you are getting your letters.

At first, I thought about putting all the teeth that fell out into the post, but then I thought it would be too scary, so I thought I would put half the teeth into the post.

Putting in half the teeth into the post is still too scary, I thought.

In the end, out of twenty teeth, then ten, then five, then three, I cut the number in half until I decided to put in only one tooth.

The tooth was the front tooth that fell first.

The reason why I chose this tooth was because it was the first one to have rot – if you look closer, you will find marks of it having a cavity before. Big sis Hibari took me to the dentist for this tooth. If he saw this, he would probably recognise it to be my tooth, but I

was not thinking of that back then.

But, as frightening as this revenge plan is, even though it scares even me, it was in the end a quick, casual plan – if I were to go to sis's address from the car park I hid for one day (I did not have money, so all I could do was walk there without any money), I would have to pass by the house no matter what, so I wanted to have a reason, I wanted to make myself brave enough so that I could walk past there.

It was a revenge plan I did do.

I did something that I did not need to do at all. I am reflecting on this. For my shameful revenge to cause big sis to be suspected as a kidnapper was something I had never ever thought of.

I am a bad girl.

I am a bad grown-up.

The gods did punish someone like me in the end. While I was walking at night, I became a lost child (not a lost child, a lost grown-up?), and it took me a long time to get to big sis's block of flats (I am not sure if nobody saw me), but Hibari was not home.

Entering the place even though she was not there feels very wrong – but I have not eaten anything in two whole days (even though I am used to not eating much), and I am tired from having been walking a whole night. If I stayed in the walkway naked, I think that would not have been a good thing either.

I thought it would not be too long before she came back. I could not wait for sis to see me grown-up now.

In the kitchen, I saw a set of children's silverware, which I think sis bought them for me when I go there and visit her.

It was very touching.

But it was silverware that I could not put to my use. That was because I was now the same age as my big sis. I felt a little happy at the thought of that.

I ate the things in the refrigerator, and I helped myself to the bathtub in the flat. I have been feeling cold ever since I was naked, so I lent some clothes too. There is an air-conditioner inside the flat, but I do not know how to use it.

By the way, big sis Hibari's place really has 'planty' of stuff inside, it felt like it was paradise.

Unlike my house, I could make myself very comfortable here (the emergency stairs that I thought were comfortable before were in the end only emergency stairs) – I felt if I stayed in this place here, I can take all the time I want in waiting.

But even after waiting and waiting, big sis never showed up.

Even after a few days.

I got scared once again.

Could something have happened to my big sis, I wondered. Maybe some would say these are foolish thoughts, but a part of me thought that in order for me to have become a grown-up, big sis Hibari had to turn into a child in some way.

So, I have to save her.

Now, it is my turn to protect Hibari – I started looking for clues as I held on to that incorrect train of thought.

I pretended that it was like the detective stories I had been reading in the library.

I only checked the computer last. Because I cannot use those things well. The uncle who lives together with us sometimes uses one for work at home, but I only saw him using it a few times – however, after I had looked around the entire flat, this computer had become the last chance I could maybe find any clues.

The password on her computer was Benishouga.

Damn you, Hibari-onee-chan.

I did not want to save her as much as I did any more – but, however, I saw a ? on the corner of her email blinking, and my sense of responsibility came back to me.

I am not sure what an email looks like, but I can see from the words that the uncle who lives with us has been arguing with my big sis and has argued with her.

There were lots of kanji I could not read, and I do not know all the details, but it looks like they think I had become kidnapped.

Someone in the same year as Hibari had found the clothes, the teeth, and the backpack that belonged to me. Why would that guy go to some place like that?

So there are people who go and do something so strange.

And also, my sis has become a suspect – the uncle who lives with us, Hibari's 'real father' was now angry.

Would that make me a relative of the criminal? He said some really bad words to her – sis's real father is really mad at her now.

I could not look at it any more.

I have to tell big sis that I am fine, but I have no idea how to send an email. If I press the wrong buttons, this machine could blow up into pieces, and plus, what should I write in that email? How should I tell her that she is now suspected of being a kidnapper even though that is wrong?

Do they give kidnappers the death penalty?

Even so, I wanted to send an email without the computer blowing up, so as I 'manuvered' for results, I learnt to read the things sent between my big sis and other people.

There was someone called Shounou Mitono.

I do not know who this person was, but in the middle of this, I found the name of the person who went to the emergency stairs.

He is in the same year as big sis is.

The guy is called Araragi Koyomi.

All I can do is meet with this person. I will just have to ask him the things I had missed from the emails. Because it looks like they have never met each other, I thought if I dressed up and pretended to be like my big sis, I could get him to tell me everything.

I am pretending to be Hibari. I am Hibari.

I know this was not the right time, but I started feeling giddy at the thought.

Maybe the thing I wanted to be was not a grown-up, but Hibari, I thought this thought to myself.

Anyway, in order to avoid Araragi Koyomi-san realising that I am the younger sister as well as a child, I must look more grown-up, and looks as much like big sis Hibari as I could.

If I wore the clothes that was in the closet, I would definitely look like big sis Hibari.

Clothes that look grown-up…I can probably find that on the computer. I may not know how to send emails, but I know how to do a web search. It is something that is easy.

A computer is like a magic box that can teach me anything. This computer is paper-thin though. A magic paper?

I wonder if I can search for anything else through it.

It would be for later. An exit path.

If I am making trouble for big sis Hibari, I could not stay there forever…I have to escape from this place.

But, where can I go? Where can I go to go back?

I do not have anywhere I can go, nor do I have a home to go back to.

Having become a grown-up, there is nothing more I can become any more.

Because I am already grown up.

For me, everything is over already.

036

‘Yes, it’s all over! The hardest years of your life are all over!’

Following a tremendous cry that rang across the shrine, the new god of lost children, Hachikuji Mayoi, embraced the woman in the recruit suit; that is, Benihibari; that is, Beniguchi Hibari; that is, Impostor Benihibari; that is, Benikujaku-chan; that is, Transistor Slender; that is, Beniguchi Kujaku-chan, embracing her with a strength that matched the volume of her cry.

The imagery of a ten-year-old-looking god hugging an eighteen-year-old-looking small girl strikes a certain type of imbalance – a hug where both hands struggle to reach towards the back.

‘So, all you have to look forward to is joy after joys! Let’s go and do everything you’ve always wanted to do! You can do anything! Do you know why? Because, Benikujaku-san, you’re still alive!

‘Thank goodness you’re not dead!

‘Welcome, welcome to my place!’

Sitting despondently in the middle of her words, Benikujaku-chan’s face was pressed tightly by Hachikuji’s own – as if she’d been waiting to do it when she finally finished her exposition.

‘Make friends, make love, make your own family! You’ll meet lots of people you’ll like! Be obsessed with everybody! If there’s something you’d like, embrace it tightly the way I’m embracing you right now! You don’t have to give up on anything any more! Magnificent, isn’t it? I’m so happy for you! You can go anywhere you want, and eat any dish you fancy! You can finish every dessert, and you can cure all your rotten teeth! You can be happy in any way you want; you’ll never live a single boring moment from now on! If you want a life filled with wonder, then set sail! There’s no need to wear any masks, you can become anybody! A songstress, a manga artist, an actress, an athlete, a politician, an astronaut, or even be a *Pretty Cure* girl or a *Kamen Rider*, you can be anybody! So, a most difficult choice lies before you! Which road would you

choose?'

'I – I…'

In the face of Hachikuji's relentless barrage, Benikujaku-chan strained in giving a response – she would've cried if she could, but the tears had already run dry.

So she gave a half-smile.

Completely un-adult-like.

'I want to see my big sis.'

'Then go ahead and see her.'

'I want to get out of that house.'

'Then go. But of course, you've already left. That place is no home of yours.'

'I want – I want to hate mummy.'

'It's okay to hate someone.'

'And the uncle who lives with us –'

'It's okay if you don't think of him.'

'I want some clothes…'

Speaking of which, Benikujaku-chan is naked.

I thought she wore something else after taking off that suit, but if she thought she was causing her older sister trouble, then it's inconceivable for her to wear her sister's other clothes.

Benikujaku-chan climbed up this mountain – baring her all, bare-footed.

'Then I'll prepare some. You really are free of any desires. What kind of clothes do you want?'

‘Cute ones – kid’s clothes.

‘I –

Benikujaku-chan made a wish – prayed to god –

‘Please, I want to go back to being a kid, please.’

‘Of course you can.’

Hachikuji pressed her face even harder onto Benikujaku-chan’s.

‘This time, take it slow, take it carefully, take it diligently, take it with leisure – take your time in becoming the grown-up you want to be.

‘There’s no need to rush.

‘You can take all the time you need, as long as you’re alive.’

She repeated once more at the end.

Rewinding, repeating, revolving – spiralling.

037

The epilogue, or maybe, the punch-line of this story.

It goes without saying that Benikujaku-chan didn't make her way up the Kitashirahebi Shrine herself – the shrine's proprietor, Hachikuji, lent a guiding hand.

If she could do that, then she should've done that from the start – please don't say something as heartless as that. At the very least, I wouldn't have expected her to trigger such 'odd phenomena', and from what I heard from Benikujaku-chan herself, she did set off to her older sister's place first, so it wouldn't have been until nightfall, when she left the block of flats naked, that she was really, utterly 'lost'.

Lost.

Losing her way.

Surrounded by dead ends.

To describe it as 'streaking' would perhaps give an improper impression that is too much yet too mild, but an eighteen-year-old woman circling the town baring her all is an unpredictable situation – in that sense, we really barely made it in time.

But in the end, I couldn't say I had much of a hand in this case – the one who really sank her teeth into this case would have to be the one who stayed in the shrine all this time: Hachikuji.

'Sorry, a slip of the teeth.'

Something like that – snails do have teeth, after all. Teeth about as sharp as a file.

Yes, Hachikuji Mayoi.

She's not lost at all.

I could never be as certain as her.

Knowing that this world is nowhere near as gentle, I could never hold that kind of conviction – neither could Hanekawa, nor Oshino, nor Gaen-san.

Benikujaku-chan saying that death would be better isn't something we can outright deny – anyone near the age of twenty would've thought that at least once.

But not Hachikuji, who died when she was ten.

But not Hachikuji, who's been to hell and back.

It's how she can be so genuinely, so unabashedly glad over her being alive.

What a great thing it is for her to be alive over the last few days, over the past decade.

Thank you, for having been born.

Thank you, for continuing to live.

If I said that in the video, it'd have ended with everybody laughing at me, and for some people it'd be something arrogantly presumptuous to say, but does it matter? Think of it as something god says, something to forget eventually.

Honestly, after having yanked Hachikuji from hell and leaving her with little choice but to become the new proprietor of the Kitashirahebi Shrine, I wouldn't say I wasn't worried about whether she was fit for the job or not – it's not often my thoughts get all knotty over this.

But she's more than capable.

If you had been at the shrine at the start, I'd probably never have ended up a vampire – but, that'd also mean I'd never have met you, and that simply wouldn't do.

So, let's go through the rigmarole first. Shinobu successfully

performed an energy drain, and Benikujaku-chan returned to looking like she's ten – like she'd always been. That said, it was a rather brutish way of recovery, so it must've been painful for her – like the opposite of growth pains. But it's a pain Benikujaku-chan was willing to take.

She didn't take the easy way out.

Ononoki-chan contacted Gaen-san to let her clean up the mess – and having sprang into action over a kidnapping case, the local police ceased their operation, just like that. Only Gaen-san can manage such an unthinkable task.

Really, I owe her big time…I can't imagine what I'd have to do to pay her back come four years. But there's also a part of me that's looking forward to it…I only say this knowing I wouldn't see her soon, but going four years without seeing her does make me quite lonely. Can't she break a promise?

However, being in Australia when the incident happened and having an airtight alibi, Beniguchi Hibari had never been seriously considered a suspect; not by anybody, not even her father.

There was no need to prove her innocence; having only skimmed those messages, Benikujaku-chan jumped to conclusions – well, my guesses don't hit the mark much either, so I'm not in a position to say much else.

Treating the multi-storey car park as a hiding place because she wanted to jump off it, dropping that front tooth into the postbox because she wanted to turn it into some box of horrors…who'd have guessed?

Kids really are infinitely imaginative.

Needless to say, having reverted to being a small girl, Benikujaku-chan didn't go back to the Beniguchi residence…gods don't go back on their word.

The things that were done by her parents-in-name-only – or more specifically, what they didn't do – wasn't as simple as neglect.

Not only was it enough for a civil case, it's plenty even for a criminal case.

No need for Gaen-san to involve herself, my parents (who have already gotten themselves involved under the rather-undesirable moniker 'guarantor of their son') probably wouldn't sit in silence – and neither would I.

Let's do what I couldn't do in that Golden Week a year ago.

I'll do what I couldn't do before.

Not because I've grown-up.

But for the sake of growing up.

More than that, to make the world a better place.

'And? What's going on, Koyomi? If you're okay with it, go ahead. I'm all ears.'

'Piss off.'

'I can't believe you of all people would tell me to piss off…boo hoo hoo…'

Weeping like a classically-trained actress, Hitagi sat across me – the place was the same as last time, the cafeteria in Manase University.

It looks like it's going to rain, so unlike last time where we sat at the open terrace, today's lunchtime was spent indoors.

I say lunchtime, it's more a meeting, so consider this a lunchminute.

The injunction isn't completely lifted, and this is something rather delicate, but sharing every story about oddities was a promise I made with this insufferable nuisance of a female uni student – I never thought I'd have to share this, but if it involves a 'Revolver', then I guess I have to.

I explained what I could to Hitagi, mindful of the personal privacy of those involved – the tale of a child wanting to hurry and grow

into an adult.

‘Hmph. I see, huh, so that’s it. Great job. So you got your happy ending. All’s well that ends well. Ayy, it was worth stopping by in the middle and asking you how it’s going. At least everybody got something good out of it, eh?’

‘Seriously, man, get lost.’

If you weren’t interested, then why even bother?

A happy end this was not.

‘Everyone’s working towards a happy end, aren’t they? That’s a happy end to me.’

‘Why does it sound like you’ve been listening even though you haven’t…’

‘Or should I say Koyomi’s invented a brand-new form of paedophilia by having a kid look like they’re above eighteen? I must say, my boyfriend’s awfully talented when it comes to finding loopholes.’

‘Once your Assam tea latte arrives I’d like to kindly ask you to sod off back to your home. To your real home. Where you can be told off. By your parents.’

‘Deary me.’

Having inserted a gag that would’ve made the floor collapse with laughter were it three centuries ago, Hitagi continued with a question.

‘A “Revolver”; so it’s an oddity that speeds up time?’

Well, for her to remember the name shows she has been listening.

‘It’s less an acceleration and more a revolution. As the name suggests…twisting space and time. You might as well call it a shortcut – instead of going round and round a set spiralling path, it felt more like taking a direct path to the centre.’

A snail is a snail after all.

They'd never go fast – they'd only shorten distances.

'So the opposite of "more haste, less speed". "More haste, more speed". Wanting to grow back into a child, huh. I once reckoned "wanting to return to a former self" to be nothing more than pointless nostalgia, but now, I can't help but ponder…'

'Are you actually even pondering…?'

'Don't cast doubt over your girlfriend's words. Putting aside whether that was a lie, the fact that you doubted me means I can foresee our relationship falling apart.'

Her fighting words may be a thing of the past, but her eloquent side hasn't changed – 'wanting to return to a former self', I see.

Eh, it might've been the opposite of what I said to the Girls' Basketball Club in that video message, but I can't deny the part of me that wanted to return to high school.

Those were good times.

Those were better times.

That wasn't the case; all I was left with then were painful memories and experiences, yet even so, the reason why those thoughts pop up is because just as humanity looks forward to the future, it also pines for the past.

That's why people think the past's a better place.

That's why people believe.

Yet in order to do this, one must first accumulate enough events to form a 'past' – no shortcuts, even if it means going the long way round.

More haste, less speed.

To borrow from that unpleasant swindler, I guess this was the

lesson I should take home from this – having graduated, matriculated, and begun a new path, that allure of 'the past being great' would still remain in ten years' time.

'Once able to capture feelings like not wanting to go home, I see Hachikuji-san's saved a girl leaving home using her unhappy past experiences. Just as this consultant predicted.'

'When have you ever acted as my consultant?'

'I told you, didn't I? "Since you're Araragi Koyomi". Or would you prefer me bringing out the informational board?'

So that's it.

It's not exactly easy, but she makes it look easy even though it isn't, this consulting business.

'You do know I'm gunning for a top financial consultancy for a billion-dollar company, right? I can't wait ten years. If only the "Revolver" can work its magic on me too…'

'What mental gymnastics did you do in order to reach that conclusion from what I've said?'

You weren't listening all along, were you?

Christ on a bike. Never change, Senjougahara Hitagi.

'Anyway, if we think of it in the realms of oral tradition, the "Revolver" would be a ghost tale of a child who went up the hills and returned home an adult. I've only thought of it just now, but isn't that a bit like being spirited away? A child going missing only for them to return after a decade?'

'I'm quite sure the latter involves the child returning as a child, right? Either way, spirited away is a good way of putting it. It was Hachikuji keeping the child away from her parents, after all. Almost like taking her in a temple for refuge', Hitagi said.

It wasn't a temple, but a shrine – but then again, there is the 'ji' ['temple'] in 'Hachikuji'…like the snail, such similarities probably

deserve further looking into.

Well, this is more a task for Gaen-san…

It's a necessary distinction.

'You can do things you couldn't have done as a high schooler now. Conversely, there's also things you could've done as a high schooler that you can no longer do. Like letting a young girl sit on your shoulder.'

'Hm? No, I can still totally do that…'

'If I can bemuse you with a loli slave joke, then it means everything's really done and dusted. Well then, I've still got lectures to attend, so if you'll excuse me. Let's continue to do our best, okay? I'm wishing for you to become a man worthy of me.'

'What kind of conclusion is that?'

'I'll keep checking in on you. Don't get carried away.'

With a gentle grin, Hitagi-san took her bill and left with gusto – if she said she was busy today, then that must mean it's a long walk from the next lecture hall again.

Time waits for no one.

Although I should imagine she could slow down a bit too…then again, I should probably be grateful that she could spare the time to listen to me in the middle of a busy day.

Right, it's about time I went to my classes too.

It's alright if I took my time, but it's not good if I stopped moving… it's about time I really needed to meet up with Meniko. As I prepared to leave, engrossed in my own thoughts –

'Please excuse me, is this seat taken, please?'

As if waiting for Hitagi to leave this entire time, a certain voice beckoned me to sit face-to-face – whilst that seat wasn't taken at all,

and I needed to leave, the déjà vu made me instinctively sat back down.

In front of me, was a lady in a recruit suit – not.

Wearing a healthy-looking white blouse and a skirt with suspenders, a tulip hat and a backpack, in full transistor slender, was a primary school girl.

She wasn't wearing pumps, nor was she barefoot, but wearing a pair of boots, matching the colour of her umbrella.

'Go ahead – what about school? I thought you transferred.'

'Please, I have a half day of lessons for school today.'

Benikujaku-chan sat after finishing that sentence – maybe it's force of habit, or maybe it's an oddity after-effect like my vampirism; the only thing that hasn't changed was her eagerness to please.

A half-day, I see.

'So, before going back to big sis Hibari's place – our place, I took the longer path because I wanted to say thank you to Araragi-san.'

The longer path.

Eh, chances are she couldn't stay until evening, so she made up some excuse to come here and see her older sister, but even so, hearing those words, I'm overjoyed.

In the end, she may have urgently headed back, but I never managed to catch a glimpse of Benihibari…perhaps one day, I can meet her through Mitonon.

It's a small world – five circles.

When the time does come, I hope she doesn't find out about my illegal entry with the tween girl – that said, with her coming here and thanking me –

'Didn't I say? There's no need to thank me. I only did what was

reasonable – or should I say, what was unreasonable.'

'I think a world like this is a beautiful world.'

As Benikujaku-chan gave her response, the waiter came by to take her order – now that she no longer needed to pretend to be an adult, will it be orange juice, or will it be a milkshake?

No matter what she orders, it'll be my treat, a toast to her new beginnings. As I gazed intently on the small girl, anticipating her next move, she ultimately said, nervously,

'A coffee, please. Black, please.'

…Well, when it comes to that kind of pretending to be something you're not, isn't that exactly what a kid would do?

1 Her name is given as ‘Higasa Seiu’ in the preceding book. Same kanji (日傘星雨), different reading.

2 海老反り (*ebizori*): belly down (sometimes), legs up, hands stretching up or back to meet the legs as the torso arches back (like a shrimp). Look it up if this description isn’t visual enough.

3 雀 is not gender-specific, though technically it should be ‘peahen’ since it’s a she.

4 Literally ファイブサークル (*faibu sākuru*) in the original. There is a Japanese term for it, and it involves the word ‘six’, but it seems either Koyomi or Nisio had mangled it beyond recognition.

5 See the endnotes for ‘Tsukihi Undo’ from *Orokamonogatari* on why I translate Ononoki’s ‘oni no onii-chan’ like this. No, unlike what the book says, you should *definitely* start this series from a few books earlier.

6 二十一九寺 (‘twenty-one-kuji’) and 二十二九寺 (‘twenty-two-kuji’) respectively.

7 For the sake of clarification, the original word is女児 (*joji*).

8 ‘Transistor slender’ is presumably a reference to ‘transistor glamour’, a Japanese phrase that originated in the 1950s when transistor radios were becoming popular. It refers to attractive women with a small stature, contrasting against the trend towards taller figures then.

9 The original was a deliberate typo / tongue slip: 経験放物線 (*keiken-hōbutsusen*, ‘experience parabola’), as opposed to 経験豊富 (*keiken-hōfu*, ‘experience-rich’).

10 In addition to the visual kanji pun, Kindaichi Kōsuke is himself a renowned fictional detective under the pen of Yokomizo Seishi.

11 In the original: 一切 (*issai*, ‘everything’, lit. ‘one cut’), 十一切 (*jūissai*, the pun, lit. ‘eleven cuts’), and 十一歳 (*jūissai*, ‘eleven years old’ and the second part of the pun).

12 In the original, モータープール (‘motor pool’) instead of the standard 駐車場 (*chūshajō*). Itself loaned from English, but nowadays it’s a false friend, hence the switch. It is more often used around Kansai.

13 Statistics time! The Japanese ‘standard score’ (偏差値) is a measure of a student’s *relative* academic performance based on the normal distribution. It is identical to a Z-test, but the scale is different, with 50 being the mean, and every ± 10 marks = ± 1 standard deviation. A standard score of 25 means being in the top 99.38% of candidates, hence Araragi’s unimpressed response.

14 This translation uses the European system of numbering floors, so the ‘first floor’ here would be the ‘second floor’ in North America and Japan.

15 ‘Recruit suits’ are a characteristic of Japanese job-hunting culture, and are virtually standardised outfits jobseekers are expected to wear to interviews.

16 Beniguchi’s speech has a highly noticeable verbal tic, in this case, unnecessarily stacked polite forms. If a sentence is supposed to end with *masu*, she adds a *desu* after it. If a sentence ends with *deshita*, she adds a *mashita* after it. If a sentence ends with *masu kara*, she adds a *desu kara*, and so on, presumably a play on what this polite style of speech is called in Japanese, the *desu-masu-chō*. This unnatural redundancy is approximated in the translation via excessive polite interjections and repetitive sentence structures, amongst other tricks.

17 ‘OB Club’ in the original; for some reason Nisio seems to have mistaken OG (‘old girls’) for OB (‘old boys’) for exactly one time once again (it happened in *Shinobumonogatari* too). I have taken the liberty of correcting it.

18 This is a *very* loose interpretation of うつろいねじり (*utsuroi-nejiri*): a more literal translation would be ‘changing twist’, ‘twist’ in the sense of applying torque, not the plot device or a certain dance. ‘Revolver’ is a purely personal, arguably ill-considered choice taking into account its proximity to the original, its nature as an oddity (‘changing twist’ sounds really lame, honestly), the context specific to this arc, the multiple meanings of ‘revolve’ (and therefore ‘revolver’), and the fact that I have the option to use a lengthy footnote to explain all this. And also *the* quintessential Beatles album, but you didn’t hear it from me.

19 回覧板 (*kairanban*). Formal as the prevalent translated term is, it is, in essence, like what a paperboy does, except instead of delivering the papers, the person delivers neighbourhood notices, notifying residents of goings-on in their vicinity.

It may be the end of the chapter, but this is not the end of the book!

‘Chapter Three – Mayoi Snake’ has been translated by Mirrored Translations, and can be found online starting from here.

Since that was translated first, some segments that tie into this chapter have been whited out. Highlighting / selecting the text will make those segments reappear.

Keep in mind certain terminologies or translation styles may change owing to each translator’s personal preferences.

Afterword

Failure is an inevitability in life, but the opportunities to patch things up are few and far between. Once one fails, there's nothing one can do to salvage it; even if something similar, or, more to the point, the exact same situation arises, it is, in the end, a different occurrence; restarts don't exist in real life. Sayings such as my past failures are what made me, irresponsible as they are, do carry truth to them, so if a restart is possible, it may result in some sort of time paradox. If one ends up forgoing restarts for the sake of restarting, that'd be putting the cart before the horse. However, while it is impossible to patch things up, it isn't impossible for something to go back to where it was before, and therefore it's also impossible to act as if the idea and the prospect of restoration doesn't exist at all. The human brain prioritises rationality, so instead of overcoming past failures, one would think 'if what didn't work worked now, that would make less sense' out of respect for consistency; to put it bluntly, coherence of the whole is prioritised over success; upon repeated failures, one's heart may even find solace in the repeated result. In manga terms, it'd be like thinking how strange it'd be if the protagonist said something different between the first volume and the fiftieth; conversely, if a plot ends with the same line as it started, one would be ecstatic at the presence of what is perceived as a masterfully-executed bookend, but upon closer thought, it would also be nice if – regardless of sensibility or contradictions, regardless of logical leaps_– the present can be cleanly severed from the past. Wouldn't that be the prerequisite of any ambitious leap towards the future? If the future isn't much connected to the present, that wouldn't be much of a difficulty – if problems shall arise, then let them arise; the future will still come either way.

Araragi Koyomi's repeated failures during his high school years need little further reiteration by this point, though in this volume and the last that is Monster Season, there are passages where he is trying to 'do what he couldn't have done at high school', which does lead one to question if this was done out of optimism or pessimism, but in a sense, perhaps he, too, is on his path towards restoration. What is perhaps more surprising is that Sengoku Nadeko has completed that path of restoration, and looks poised to

take on the next challenge…? And with that, here is the twenty-fourth volume of the Monogatari Series, *Yoimonogatari*, Chapter Two – Mayoi Snail, and Chapter Three – Mayoi Snake. Volume twenty-four…? Seriously…?

For the second time, Hachikuji Mayoi graces the front cover. My heartfelt gratitude goes to VOFAN-san. The next volume, *Amarimonogatari*, will see Ononoki Yotsugi's secret finally revealed…as much as that direction isn't set in stone, I hope you will look forward to it all the same.

NISIOISIN

Translator's afterword

There's something that irks me about the term 'fan translation': the inference that any amateur attempt to make a certain work reach a wider audience has to be a fan of said work, someone who views it positively, if not uncritically so. The other term, 'unofficial translation', has an element of dastardliness to it, like an unwanted, undesirable bootleg that's been sitting in the dump, though the real reason why everybody uses 'fan' is probably because 'unofficial' is over three times as long. Whilst it is undeniable that many fan translations exist out of the translator's love for the original, my relationship with translating a small portion of the Monogatari books (which I may as well clarify I wouldn't call myself a 'fan' of) is purely transactional: if there is demand, and if nobody else wants to do it, *and* if I find translating it worthwhile, then I shall supply. For all I said about the fallaciousness surrounding the word 'fan', I admit one has to be a fan of *translation* to pump out fan translations; either that, or one's first attempt would also be their last.

If anything, the preceding volume, *Shinobumonogatari*, was a disappointment: a mediocre detective story and coming-of-age story, a story with a twist for the sake of a twist, cyphers with contrivances the '*Half-Life 3* confirmed' crowd would drool over, an arc with a hasty, inconclusive ending that ruins *Musubimonogatari*'s, a book where plot and character development were sacrificed for token, questionable humour and jokes more worn than a seventy-year-old prostitute from Hamburg – and the prostitute would still be better value for money. Perhaps Kaiki is right in that every work should have a lesson for the reader to take – yet *Shinobumonogatari* only offers lessons for the protagonist, lessons he doesn't take to heart anyway. One should then posit the entire book as a pointless exercise, save for the cash grab.

So why translate 'Mayoi Snail'? The inoffensive answer would be 'with *Shinobumonogatari* translated, the time has come to complete *Yoimonogatari*', though in truth, the decision was perhaps fuelled by an unhealthy dose of cynicism and hubris – 'to not let translations of Monogatari's main novels end on such a terrible book' (no

offence to the poor soul who translated it). I hold 'Mayoi Snail' in mildly higher regard because it's more focussed, more restrained, with a better ending that reinforces Monster Season's purported overall theme of 'growing up'. More fool me, then, that most who read *Shinobumonogatari* praised it for being unrestrained and fun – I imagine most people would hence consider 'Mayoi Snail' staid and dull. Not to say those aren't valid criticisms – 'Mayoi Snail' still shares much of the same weaknesses that mar its immediate predecessor. Metahumour is incredibly powerful in tiny doses, but Nisio uses it like it's heroin in 1970s West Berlin – if Senjougahara's early appearance was intended to be a clever subversion, the numbersome hints prior serve only to its detriment. Riding high on the success of his Forgetful Detective, it seems Nisio is hell bent on remoulding Koyomi into the Oblivious Defective – with his insistence that it can only be a kidnapping after 017, or the cafeteria scene in 019 and 020, one is once again dumbfounded and frustrated at Koyomi's judgement, such that by the time the twists come, none bar him is surprised at there being a twist. Whilst the gruelling exposition near the end is arguably more diegetic and less insidious than Koyomi claiming Harimaze's voice in parts of *Shinobumonogatari*'s narration, it similarly violates the 'show, don't tell' principle without satisfactory justification. Presenting a never-seen oddity with a novel mechanism as the 'solution' feels somewhat disingenuous and rushed, if not a case of *oddity ex machina*. As with *Shinobumonogatari*, pages that could've been spent giving new characters a personality, making us empathise with them and thereby raising the stakes were eschewed for repetitive humour between characters we're all too familiar with. One is confused as to what the author wants the reader to do: the frustrating pacing, underdeveloped characters (alongside over-developed underdeveloped ones) and unforeseeable solutions merely serve to disinvite the reader from forming their own conjectures. Editorially, it's no better – between Higasa's name, 'five circles', confusing OB with OG, half-baked wordplay that is neither funny nor satisfying to translate, and trying to pull off the *Otorimonogatari* thing again, one is increasingly convinced that consistency is Nisio's worst enemy, alongside logic, decency, and a refined sense of humour.

There's an inherent danger in attributing every inconsistency, every

poorly-written passage towards the translator, absolving the author from any accountability. As a translator, every mistake from the author means trouble, because something will always be lost – whether through not doing anything and letting myself be mistaken, clarifying via a footnote and introducing something never in the original, or by directly removing such mistakes and quirks, changing the nature of the text. There were moments when I was tempted to leave in typos and suboptimal translations, to treat the story with the same neglect (!) as the author did, though in the end, I guess the pride in doing something well (professionalism?) overrode the desire towards pettiness (though this afterword probably proves otherwise).

Be that as it may, as one can readily infer from the previous paragraphs, whatever enthusiasm present when I translated *Nademonogatari* and [the easy] parts of *Orokamonogatari* over a year ago has all but evaporated. The longer a series drags on, the more it has to justify its continued existence to a diminishing number of readers. Monster Season may attempt to reinvent itself via a drastic change in direction, but only manages to undo every reasonable conclusion Off Season made, along with a nosedive in writing quality. Given that, the chances of me returning to translate more Monogatari is virtually nil. Considering Nisio's comment on the nature of bookends, it is quite amusing that I ended translating Monogatari the same way I started – completing the remaining chapter(s) of a book started by the same colleague. I hope that, despite it all, you have found reading this first part of *Yoimonogatari* enjoyable, however unofficial its journey to English may have been.

»sawa«

June 2021

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3. Afterword

Landmarks

1. Cover